

# QUEER OUT LOUD

## Plymouth's Beacon of Light for LGBTQIA+ Expression

Kate Warring and Abbie Soddy

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*'It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences.'*  
(Audre Lorde, 2007)

When you think of Plymouth, you may immediately think of its rich naval history as 'Britain's Ocean City'. Indeed, The Royal Navy has long been a prominent presence in Plymouth and the city's maritime roots run extraordinarily deep. As a significant part of Plymouth's identity, the Navy has exerted a clear influence on several aspects of the city's social fabric, including its ever-evolving queer culture. Strolling through the rainbow streets of Bretonside, the city's emerging 'Queer District', it is difficult to imagine a time when the city's LGBTQIA+ pride was not celebrated so openly. However, institutional discrimination and military conservatism in the twentieth century included both the silencing and criminalization of queer expression. The Sexual Offences Act of 1967 saw homosexuality partially decriminalized, but it did not include those within the British Armed Forces. This further isolated queer individuals in Plymouth's navy base and community, whose only respite from the relentless prejudice was the city's 'secret' LGBTQIA+

spaces like Lockyer Tavern (Black). The LGBTQIA+ community remained otherwise hidden.

**'QOL cultivates a supportive LGBTQIA+ environment and promotes a culture of acceptance that challenges Plymouth's historical military conservatism.'**

Plymouth's difficult queer history contextualizes the recent establishment of various LGBTQIA+ literary networks like Queer Out Loud (QOL). Pushing against a history of invisibility, QOL cultivates a supportive LGBTQIA+ environment and promotes a culture of acceptance that challenges Plymouth's historical military conservatism. QOL is a literary network, founded by Plymouth Young City Laureate Mimi Jones in 2022. It organizes a variety of regular events to unite the city's LGBTQIA+ community. Growing up as a queer and neurodivergent poet,

Jones soon noticed how few queer artists were engaging with Plymouth's energetic poetry scene. In an interview with the BBC, they explained how the city's poetry community appeared to be limited to an older, white, male demographic: 'They are lovely, and they are great poets, but it is not the most comfortable place for people to go that want to talk about their experience as a trans person, or their first date with a woman' (O'Shea). In response, Jones established their own initiative to offer a safe space that amplifies LGBTQIA+ voices through creative expression. Upon founding QOL, Jones's primary aim was simply 'to read about being queer to an audience that understood it' (QueerOutLoud). Although the hub originated as a one-off relaxed poetry evening in Minerva Café, the event's wildly successful turnout illuminated a high demand for queer-inclusive spaces in the Ocean City. QOL has been growing ever since.

In just over a year, QOL has expanded into a vibrant creative network. In addition to their frequent poetry readings, the hub welcomes all art forms to further enhance the opportunity for queer expression, regardless of creative background and ability. QOL has since rebranded their poetry events, using the all-encompassing title of 'Performance Nights'. These updated events include, but are not limited to: live music, burlesque performances, comedy, drag and life drawing. QOL's



Queer Out Loud – Plymouth 2023, Evan performing. Photo by Anastasia Baskerville-Hicks.

focus on accessibility is also evident in their commitment to accommodating the neurodivergent community. While smaller organizations often do not have the resources to provide reasonable adjustments for the neurodivergent community, QOL prioritizes access for all individuals. For example, the network encourages the use of headphones and stim toys, offers quiet spaces at events and keeps noise levels under control for those with sensory issues (QueerOutLoud). By championing the inclusion of queer and neurodivergent individuals, QOL presents a wholly welcoming and accessible environment for their expanding community.

The Old Queeriosity Shop – Plymouth  
2023, Interior view of shop.  
Photo by Kate Warring.



## PLYMOUTH'S EMERGING 'QUEER DISTRICT': BRETONSIDE AND BEYOND

QOL's growing popularity reflects a recent and wide push towards LGBTQIA+ inclusivity within Plymouth. The local news outlet Plymouth Live recently named the Bretonside area as Plymouth's unofficial 'Queer District', further highlighting the city's powerful celebration of LGBTQIA+ pride (Oborn). Perhaps the best example of an LGBTQIA+ friendly business in Bretonside is The Old Queeriosity Shop,

**'The network encourages the use of headphones and stim toys, offers quiet spaces at events, and keeps noise levels under control for those with sensory issues.'**

an independent queer bookshop owned by El Redman. The physical storefront opened in October 2022, the same year as QOL's establishment. However, Redman ran the bookshop both digitally and as a pop-up at multiple pride events across the South West leading up to the store's opening. From the bright, rainbow logo on the shop's front door to the seemingly countless number of pride flags scattered across the walls and shelves, The Old Queeriosity Shop shines as a welcoming space for the LGBTQIA+ community. The shop boasts an extensive range of queer

Queer Out Loud – Plymouth 2023, Jen performing. Photo by Anastasia Baskerville-Hicks.

literature, stocking children's and adult fiction, academic texts and even locally produced zines - a book for everyone who wishes to read and relate to diverse queer lived experiences. Redman also hosts a monthly book club in collaboration with the Queer District Collective. Focusing explicitly on LGBTQIA+ voices in fiction, the book club provides another important literary network to amplify queer voices within the local community.

Another LGBTQIA+ friendly business located in Bretonside is Minerva streetwear and café. The café provides a variety of high-quality coffee, craft beer and seasonal food options, and caters to the queer community as a thriving creative hub. Hosting several events from the Queer District Collective, as well as QOL's debut poetry evening,



the business makes a conscious effort towards equality and inclusion. At the time of writing, Minerva is set to host a Christmas 'Slay Bells Drag Brunch' featuring local drag queen Layla Zee Susan alongside bottomless food and cocktails. Advocating for fun and exciting queer representation, Minerva café brings a refreshing quality to the local community that goes beyond their enticing drinks menu.

**'There was a strong sense of queerness that was intrinsically linked to the performances given, whether explicit or not.'**

Considering the city's colourful variety of LGBTQIA+ inclusive spaces and events, Plymouth appears to be emerging as a cultural hub for queer literary networks. In a recent blog post, Jones highlights QOL's goal to establish Plymouth as 'the Queer Arts Capital' (Jones). This is ambitious, yet the city's collective strides towards LGBTQIA+ celebration demonstrates radical potential. For the queer community, it seems that 'Britain's Ocean City' is truly making waves.

### **EROTIC HORROR POETRY AND STEAMPUNK PIANO: INSIDE QUEER OUT LOUD'S SEXUAL HEALTH EVENT**

Utterly windswept, battered by the rain, and falling victim to a train cancellation, we miraculously found ourselves outside of the venue just in time for QOL's erotic poetry event in collaboration with the Eddystone

Trust. First established in response to the AIDS pandemic, the Trust currently functions as an independent sexual health charity that offers HIV and sexual health-related services across the South West. As well as supporting the queer community, the Eddystone Trust strives to eliminate the social stigma and discrimination that impacts those living with HIV. During the event, this took the form of various informative sexual health talks that challenged misinformation about how STDs are spread. Armed with a colourful array of sexual protection and eager to answer any burning sex-related questions, the charity's presence undoubtedly added to the event's overarching theme of sexual empowerment and safety.

The chosen location in Leadworks embodied the event's empowering and unifying quality. Renovated by the community from a disused lead paint warehouse in 2019, the venue now offers an accessible space for grassroots arts and cultural organizations to hold events that inspire further connection within Plymouth's community (Khan). Walking into the lively cultural hub, it appeared wholly unrecognizable from its history as an industrial building. The walls were adorned with rows of warm fairy lights and artwork created by its visitors, the shelves stacked with books in the shared library. Not only does Leadworks allow local organizations the perfect venue, but it also directly provides for those in need through their community support mission. Their community fridge is the first of its kind in Plymouth, granting free food to those in need that would otherwise go to waste. They champion a 'Pay it

Forward' system on their hot drinks, where you can redeem beverages paid for in advance by other customers, no questions asked (Leadworks Projects CIC). As a radically inclusive community safe space, Leadworks presents a welcoming and energetic backdrop for QOL's events.

manages to make their space feel like home for those who need it; all our previous nerves melted away as we made our way through the crowd. As Jones introduced the poets, we settled down into the audience. It was amazing to see such queer joy emanating both from the stage and the crowd; erotic

**'Queer Out Loud manages to make their space feel like home for those who need it.'**

The erotic poetry event was home to a variety of creatives from different walks of the LGBTQIA+ community. Once we entered, it became clear to us that this was a safe space for everyone, from a steampunk pianist to a therapy dog on his very own armchair. QOL

poetry was recited as cheers and quips were exchanged. Offering their diverse perspectives on LGBTQIA+ identity and relationships, the five poets that performed were each as powerful as the next. The poetry's content also covered a wide number of topics, including

*Queer Out Loud – Plymouth 2023, Onyx performing.  
Photo by Anastasia Baskerville-Hicks.*



genres such as queer erotica, romance and relationships, and even horror. Jen, QOL's very own 'wolf doctor', read a poem about an attack from the Kraken. On the other hand, poets such as Laurie and Onyx expressed the intimacies and difficulties of queer love. There was a strong sense of queerness that was intrinsically linked to the performances given, whether explicit or not.

Both the poetry's contents and how they were performed further reinforced the limitless flexibility of queerness in literature. Immersed within the crowd, we noticed that everyone present offered their unwavering support to each performer, illuminating the community's warmth and understanding. We were even approached by an event organizer, who made sure that we were comfortable and remained on-hand to help wherever possible. Moreover, Jones was an excellent host for the event and their constant determination shone through: 'We will find a way to amplify your voice!' (QueerOutLoud). Through this encouragement and support, we can confidently say that QOL provides a space that allows queer writers and performers to meld the shape and scope of the South West's LGBTQIA+ literary scene as much as they wish.

After a quick coffee, we left QOL's poetry event with a strong hope for the queer scene in Plymouth and beyond, and we felt wholly welcomed into such an inviting and safe queer literary space. It is undoubtedly a valuable literary tool for the South West's LGBTQIA+ community who are seeking to engage in queer creativity safely. Looking forwards, Jones is enthusiastic to introduce writing workshops to create content for stage performances, and hopes to fully establish QOL as the South West's Queer Creatives Network. They are also collating a Queer Creatives Directory, which functions as a catalogue of the South West's queer artists (Jones). Considering the brief time frame in which the hub has made such great strides for queer representation, the founder's ambitious goals seem more than attainable. We look forward to hearing about many more of this organization's amazing endeavours.

## 'AN INTENTIONAL BOOKSHOP'

Q&A With Charlie Richards,  
Co-Owner of Bookbag

Aditi Kumar

This interview was conducted at the second Annual Bookselling Research Network Conferences organized in association with the Centre for Book Cultures and Publishing at the University of Reading. Presenting at this conference stemmed from the enriching experience of working with independent Exeter-based bookshop Bookbag as part of my MA Publishing work placement. I worked as a bookseller at the shop from March to May 2023, learning the operational processes of independent bookselling, attending different events where I set up pop-up bookshops, liaising with local institutions like Exeter City of Literature, and building a marketing plan for the shop.

At the University of Reading I was in conversation with Charlie Richards, co-owner of Bookbag. Richards had previously worked in marketing for independent arts and music venues in London, as well as being involved with a community bookshop in Devon before setting up Bookbag with her partner Malcolm Richards. The conference brought together academics, other bookshop owners and industry professionals, and was themed around 'Bookshops: Online and on the High Street'.

In the interview, we touched upon elements such as digitalization, community-building, co-existence with high street booksellers and more. The conversation focuses on Richards' ideas and goals for the shop, allowing space to share my own learnings from working with her as a publishing student and connecting the independent bookselling phenomenon to the wider book industry.

**Aditi Kumar:** Hello everyone. Today, we are going to talk about Bookbag, an independent bookshop in Exeter and I'm here with Charlie Richards. Can you please introduce yourself and Bookbag?

Charlie Richards: Hi, I'm Charlie. I co-own Bookbag with my partner, Malcolm, and we are very lucky to have had Aditi as a student on placement for a few months with us.

We opened Bookbag in 2020 towards the end of the pandemic lockdown. We have been called a 'radical' bookshop as a label. I'd say we are more of an 'intentional' bookshop and that goes through to our book choices – we are quite curated. We are intentional in the events we do, intentional in supporting new writers and indie presses (locally and globally), intentional in the feeling of the bookshop, that it is warm and welcoming, and intentional in where we are in the independent part of Exeter. It also goes through to sustainability in the bookshop in the environmental sense – reusing second-hand furniture when we opened the shop, to the lifecycle of the book and how can we make sure books are reused. We've been working on whether we can receive books back as second-hand after we've sold them, and if we can resell them.

**Aditi Kumar:** I would like to ask you about how you opened Bookbag in the middle of the pandemic. What was that experience like? What sort of obstacles did you face and have you seen any benefits from it?

Charlie Richards: When you start something like this in the pandemic, there are so many unknowns. We also hadn't set up a bookshop before! Now, two years have passed and I reflect on that time and think that it was an exceptionally good time to open a bookshop. Young people especially rediscovered reading in the pandemic and this is something we really noticed – young people who said that they'd stopped reading in their teens and started again during the pandemic. People, and again young people in particular, cared about where they were getting their books from.

Before we opened, having volunteered in a community-owned bookshop before and knowing how tough it could be, I was watching the reactions of bookshops and I could see it unfold that they had time to pause, think about their online presence, think about whether they had a website. If they didn't, they built one.



Shop exterior, McCoy's Arcade. Photo by Lana Danzeisen.

Such a unique amount of time could be invested in every act – they were making deliveries, they were pushing themselves within their communities.

We opened towards the end of 2020, but we went into another lockdown soon after. During that time, there were grants available for businesses that had to close; that again was a unique thing. We were able to receive a grant, pay our rent and keep going, and I can't think of any other time that would happen. On the Internet, Bookstagram and Booktok, book culture grew in a significant way as well.

2020 was also the year that saw a global movement for Black lives and people also became conscious during

that time about what they were reading, whose voices they wanted to hear, what they were being told and whose stories were out there, even reaching areas like rural Devon which isn't a place where people would always think about these perspectives. The books we were selling and who we were talking about did resonate with them.

Bookshop.org had just launched, so we knew when we opened Bookbag that we didn't have to worry about the website – that we could sell online immediately. We just had to set up our own page and we did start seeing the benefit of funding money from that immediately as we went into the lockdown. We could just start to build

a community, and have a space to point to for people to buy books which was also amazing.

Exeter had also become a UNESCO City of Literature just before the pandemic. They couldn't really do anything at that point but again, it felt like we were in a location where – well, we were a city without an independent bookshop actually, there wasn't an indie bookshop in Exeter for many years – it felt like there was a movement around bookshops, books and literature.

**Aditi Kumar: That directly links us to the sort of communities that Bookbag not only taps into but also forms. Bookbag is located in McCoy's Arcade, which has a number of independent businesses coming together and operating in a shared space. It is located on Fore Street which is also the indie quarter of Exeter. This does impact what sort of customers come in.**

**As part of my placement, I went to several schools that had invited Bookbag to do pop-ups where students could peruse a very specific curation of books – for example for a diversity conference – intentionally selected for the topics of discussion. Another set of pop-ups I ran were with indie publisher Rough Trade Books, who had collaborated with the independent library Devon and Exeter Institution to bring authors like Richard Phoenix and Zakiya McKenzie to Exeter. These events with booksellers, schools, libraries and authors also create a community of businesses, especially in a city as small as Exeter. A lot of people at this conference**

**have highlighted that establishing an independent bookshop is not solely about creating profit or gaining financial capital; it is also about having a social impact on the communities you are working with.**

**'We have been called a 'radical' bookshop as a label. I'd say we are more of an 'intentional' bookshop and that goes through to our book choices – we are quite curated.'**

Charlie Richards: Yes, creating communities – after the last lockdown not only were people desperate for physical products like books, but also to be with other people. We had students who worked in the shop and one of them used to go to poetry nights in Bangalore where she is from, and people would sit on rugs on the floor, and drink herbal tea, and they would share things that they had written with each other. She asked if she could start something like that in Bookbag and led that initiative. This is one of the nights that I am proudest of. Now, it has turned into a space where people feel safe, for example amongst the queer community in Exeter. It has become a place that they can come to and just a lovely evening. The sense of community is something people were craving and Bookbag managed to fill that gap. There are lots of things happening in Exeter

but this turned out to be a space for those marginalized communities that felt like the bookshop was their home.

**Aditi Kumar: I wanted to ask about the link between creating communities and the design of the space. The layout of the shop, the textures, the art pieces you've put in there, they are very warm and personalized. Did you think intentionally about the communities you wanted to draw in, or was it just a display of personal taste?**

Charlie Richards: I think I just wanted it to look like a front room or a record shop as well as a bookshop. Or like a

**on social media, whether it be those who used to live in Exeter but had to move away or people who had just heard about Bookbag and appreciated what the shop stood for.**

**Bookbag's social media has a lot of personal flair; you can really see the effort and commitment put into it. There are book recommendations, there is information about events, you promote other events happening in the city and more. I think this relates to how booksellers are using digital media to communicate their ideologies as well as to sell books. Can you elaborate on the relationship between physical and online bookselling?**

**'It becomes a very personal space and that is probably what makes indies stand out.'**

space that if you were into literature, then you could come there, sit down and feel comfortable: which is why sometimes the music is a little bit too loud or there is loads of art on the walls that doesn't have to do with anything. We've also predicted a lot of things – like people would need blankets on the floor for when we run out of chairs or tea cups to serve herbal tea at events and stuff like that. I think it grows from what people want from it.

**Aditi Kumar: I think the same principle applies to Bookbag's social media. It is made up of Bookbag's regular customers but also people who don't necessarily come to the shop but still want to support Bookbag. We've spoken a lot about people supporting the shop**

Charlie Richards: I think the biggest factor is how much tech is available now, even since I volunteered at a community-owned bookshop a couple of years before opening Bookbag. It is really easy now to buy a ready e-commerce site and integrate your stock with a few clicks and an Excel spreadsheet. The tech is amazing and that combined with bookshop.org has been really helpful.

I want to share a quick example about how building an online community can be great because I'm kind of obsessed with this. There is a local author called Sophie Pavelle who is a climate scientist, and she wrote a book about species and the environment. She's got lots of followers on Instagram. She told all of them something like 'Please support my

Shop interior. Photo by Lana Danzeisen.



local indie bookshop. This is where I'm doing my launch. I'll send you signed copies'. We were sending hundreds of books out all over the country. We are a local bookshop in Exeter but also an online bookshop. It was Sophie's community who supported her: they bought their books from us. I find it really interesting – how an author can choose to empower us as booksellers.

**Aditi Kumar:** When I joined, you introduced me to the digital tools you use to position Bookbag online. When I was then writing my essay for my placement module assessment, one of the things I was thinking about is how indie bookshops are not just surviving but also thriving in the marketplace today and what sort of coexistence they have with chain booksellers. A big gap that I witnessed not just in scholarly literature but also in practicality was how, because indies don't have the sort of financial capital to invest in proprietary software for their purposes, the industry has some way to go towards supporting indies in making the practical aspects of bookselling more updated and streamlined. Gardners as a distribution platform really helps out bookselling activities, but there is also a need for making technologies easier to access and easier to work with, especially if you consider that indies don't have specially trained booksellers dealing with their stocks and management.

**That is all we have from our end. We are happy to take questions from the audience about Bookbag and the positioning of independent bookshops in the marketplace.**

**Audience Question: What is the role of bookshops as social institutions? This is in the light of bookshops having a tendency to become like any other high street seller. So my question is what is a bookshop – what makes it unique and where do we set the boundaries of what a bookshop is?**

**'I think I just wanted it to look like a front room or a record shop as well as a bookshop.'**

Charlie Richards: I can't think of many examples of retail businesses that are also cultural hubs – so they straddle this fine boundary. I'm part of this partnership network that the UNESCO City of Literature set up but I know I'm one of the few people around the table, which includes museums and literary organizations, that doesn't receive Arts Council funding, for example. We fund all our events from how many books we've sold.

There are also so many demands for attention today like Netflix or going out or eating out. For us to stand out, it is the added flourishes and details that make sure that when someone is walking into the shop, they are getting the full experience. I think that is what Bookbag is meant to feel like for customers – like they've had an amazing night out. From the refreshments to the lighting, everything has got to be really nice. Then you are more likely next time to support us in different ways and bring your friends.

Aditi Kumar: What strikes me as a unique factor about bookshops is that I don't necessarily have to go and purchase something. We were talking about Bookbag as a space where you can go and take a corner, sit down and read something, work on something,

have a writer in town, they use our accounts to order the books and we sell the books on the evening of the event. The authors sign the books and we keep the profits from the sales. So we see that it is individuals who decide how things are done.

**'I find it really interesting – how an author can choose to empower us as booksellers.'**

have conversations with Charlie or the other booksellers. It is not specifically financial profit that indies are aiming for and that isn't how other retailers would work. They work to sell, they want to make a profit. And while indies also want to make a profit to sustain their business, there is a higher purpose that they are serving. It becomes a very personal space and that is probably what makes indies stand out.

**Audience Question: How are the local communities supporting and representing bookstores? How is that flipside relationship working for you?**

Charlie Richards: I think we've been really lucky in that we've had so much of our local community be really supportive. I gave you the example of the local author earlier who supported us, financially too as it turned out, and there are other authors that do make a point of coming into the store whenever they can.

There are also a lot of local arts organizations who have wanted to hold author events – it was more about writers rather than books. When they

Aditi Kumar: I think it is a symbiotic relationship in the sense that if the space is there, people will come. For some of the events that are hosted in the shop, people do have to pay an amount to attend. People readily turn up and engage actively; even on social media, people who have moved away or generally support Bookbag share posts and share these events within their networks. It is a very equal relationship where Bookbag isn't doing more or less for the community than the community is offering to the shop. I think it's been quite well-balanced.

**Audience Question: Have you ever altered or tailored your curation and how you do your business to the specific community or tastes in Exeter?**

Charlie Richards: Probably not actually. We've gone the opposite way in many ways. There are a lot of literary festivals, like the International Agatha Christie Festival, that can be considered establishment festivals in Devon. They have been there for years and have brought great authors. But we are bringing lesser-known authors and working hard to try to push them. We had Sheena Patel who was a debut Rough Trade author and we worked really hard to fill the room for the event. Then she went and won so many prizes for her book, *I'm A Fan*, this year. I think we got a little bit lucky with that one, but people start to trust you and they are more likely to take a chance on you. I think we should be pushing authors like that and trying our hardest not just to bring what people would like to see but what we want them to see.

*If you want to know more about Bookbag and what is on, you can visit their website [www.bookbag.shop](http://www.bookbag.shop) or find them on Instagram at [bookbag.shop](https://www.instagram.com/bookbag.shop)*



# THE CORNISH LANGUAGE AND ITS LITERARY NETWORKS

Elio Smith y Díaz-Andreu in collaboration with Emma Stonehouse

When delving into the literary scene of the South West, it is important to break free from an English-centric perspective and consider minority language publishing. Indeed, not only does Cornwall have a language, but a critically endangered one that is a fascinating example of language revival – where a previously extinct language is brought back to life. Here we will take a look at the origin and history of the Cornish language and discover which publishing networks are working towards its revival.

## CORNISH: A BRIEF HISTORY

Cornish, the Celtic language from Cornwall, emerged after the Britons of Cornwall and Wales were separated by the Saxons at the end of the sixth century, leading to divergent linguist evolutions between Cornish and Welsh (MacKinnon 5). In 931, when Cornwall fell under English rule, English was made the official governmental language (Halliday 94–95). Consequently, the language was pushed further and further into the margins of society. After the 1549 Prayer Book Rebellion, Cornish declined precipitously. The first Book of Common Prayer, presenting the theology of the English Reformation, was introduced in that year. While the Catholic Church had been sympathetic towards Cornish, the new English Protestantism was not. The enforcement of the English language led to an explosion of anger in Cornwall and Devon, initiating the uprising. The rebels were massacred by Edward VI's army and English was imposed in church services. The rebellion also entailed stigmatization of the Cornish language and traditional Cornish culture (Dunmore 6).

By the seventeenth century, the language was confined to the far end of the Cornish peninsula (Renkó-Michelsén 182), enduring until at least the end of the eighteenth century (Dunmore 6), and later dominating industrial vocabulary and place names (Dunmore 10). Mining and Methodism – a religion that had swept into Cornwall from 1743 onwards – overtook the language as the basis of a distinctive Cornish identity (Dunmore 11).

Economic decline and de-industrialization from the 1860s onwards stopped the new, self-confident regional identity of Cornwall in its tracks, leading to the Cornish Revival. The Cornish middle class, influenced by the wider Celtic Revival taking place in Ireland, Scotland and Wales, wanted a new, romantic image of their identity. The turn of the twentieth century saw the publication of Henry Jenner's *Handbook of the Cornish Language*, triggering great interest in the language amongst linguists and scholars. Soon after in the 1920s, organizations promoting Cornish language and culture such as The Federation of Old Cornwall Societies and Gorsedh Kernow were founded. However, while the Revival had succeeded with parts of the Cornish middle class, it remained unfamiliar to much of the Cornish population (Payton). The movement failed to incorporate symbols of Cornish identity, and the emphasis on Celtic-Catholic traditions clashed with the predominantly Methodist public (Payton). As a result, many revivalist institutions faded away (Deacon).

**‘Not only does Cornwall have a language, but a critically endangered one, and one that is a fascinating example of language revival...’**

Cornwall's demographic revolution sparked a new wave of interest from 1952 onwards (Deacon 207). Annual net migration figures increased rapidly over the 1960s until the late 1980s (Mitchell). The largely middle-class nature of this immigration led to stark contrasts in the lifestyles of wealthy newcomers and poorer locals, with urban centres throughout Cornwall becoming increasingly gentrified (Deacon 208). The sense of threatened identity led to a resurgence of Cornish. It was only after the 1970s that some families decided to raise their children in Cornish, creating the first new generation of native Cornish speakers (George and Broderick 644–645). Twentieth century reconstructionists of the Cornish language had encountered problems deciding which period of traditional Cornish should be taken as the starting point for the language revival movement (Williams vi). The approximately 176,000 words found in the traditional Cornish texts that survived came from various time periods (roughly from the eighth to the eighteenth century) and geographical locations in Cornwall (George and Broderick 754). Many words had changed over time or had multiple dialectal versions (Ferdinand, 'A Brief History' 211). In 1929 Robert Morton Nance published *Cornish for All*, in which he outlined a standard form for the language based on medieval Cornish (later called Unified Cornish), as well as three dictionaries, one in 1934 alongside A.S.D. Smith and the latter two in 1952 and 1955.

Criticism of this form began to grow and in 1972 the Kesva an Taves Kernewek (Kesva), also known as the Cornish Language Board, published *Kernewek Bew* by Richard Gendall which outlined a form based on eighteenth century Cornish (Late Cornish), following with a dictionary in 1991. The struggle continued, with a new

orthography, Ken George's Common Cornish, proposed in 1986, eventually taken up by Kesva. Many individuals and organizations, however, continued backing either Unified Cornish or Late Cornish (Ferdinand, 'A Brief History' 215). This became a problem when attempting to bring the language back into common use, with much factionalist infighting through the 1970s until the mid-2000s. In 2008, six different language groups came together to agree on a Single Written Form of the language (known as the SWF). The consensus set the Revival on a new footing, with the SWF emerging as a standard for use in schools and in public life (Bock and Bruch 1).

Today, the Revival is in full swing. Public bodies such as Cornwall County Council have been instrumental in promoting the language, aiming to 'set out a future for the language where Cornish [will] once again be a widely spoken community language' (*Cornish Language Strategy* 4). The language has also gained legal legitimacy. In 2002, the UK government recognized Cornish as a minority language falling under Part II of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (Renkó-Michelsén 192).

## PUBLISHING IN CORNISH

Cornish language use remains small. A 2018 study established the number of people in Cornwall with at least minimal skills in Cornish to be more than 3,000, of whom only an estimated 500 were fluent speakers (Ferdinand, 'The Promotion of Cornish'). As such a small language, organizations seeking to preserve it must both promote the intergenerational transmission of the language and teach newcomers. Due to the original lack of native speakers, the Revival movement has always relied upon the written word both in reconstructing the language and preparing the first language learning materials. Renkó-Michelsén states that 'Cornish literacy is present in the homes of those who speak the language to some extent, as the majority of the Cornish speakers acquire the language through the use of written material' (191). Cornish language publishing can be divided into four distinct categories: language learning materials, children's books, adult's books, and historical/religious texts. The organizations involved also fall into three categories: institutions founded to encourage the growth of Cornish as a spoken language, publishers interested in minority languages and regions, and small presses which employ one or two people.

The presses most active in the field of Cornish language textbook production at present are Kesva; Agan Tavas, a society to promote spoken Cornish; Everttype, a minority-language press; Welsh publisher Y Lolfa Cyf; and South West and Yorkshire regional publisher Tor Mark, who acquired the small publisher Dyllansow Truran as an imprint after the founder died in 1997 (Len Truran Political Papers). Truran has kept in print early Cornish language textbooks reissued by the publisher in the 1980s, such as celebrated Cornish Revival poet A.S.D. Smith's *Cornish Simplified*, first published in 1939 (1979, 1981, 1984 and 1987). It will very occasionally bring out new material, such as a dictionary in 2005. Kesva has, since at least 1996, brought

out a significant number of textbooks and other language learning texts (Brown 1996-1998; Prys 2011; Sandercock 2003, 2004, 2021) Agan Tavas, having operated in this field since 1987, similarly has a wealth of textbooks and learning materials, most recently publishing the first SWF course book, *Skeul an Tavas* (2010). Everttype entered the textbook scene with *Desky Kernowek: A complete guide to Cornish* by pre-eminent translator Nicholas Williams (2012). Finally, Y Lolfa Cyf also dipped into the Cornish language with a series of more light-hearted books such as *Teach your Cat Cornish* (Gruffudd 2003; Cakebread 2019 and 2023). All of these organizations also sell Cornish dictionaries, grammar books, and verb and phrase books of increasing proficiency levels. Smaller companies are also active in this area. The micro-press of Cornish-language and bilingual books Ors Sempel brought out a Cornish dictionary in association with The Cornish Language Circle [An Kylgh Kernewek] in 2018. Spyrys a Gernow, a Cornish language publishing and book supply company, has a conversation book (Harris et al. 2009) and a phrase book (Bice 2013). Both Oxford University Press (2013) and Cambridge University Press (Jago 2014) have also published Cornish language dictionaries.

**'As such a small language, organizations seeking to preserve it must both promote the intergenerational transmission of the language and teach newcomers.'**

Kensa Broadhurst, PhD student at The Institute of Cornish Studies within the University of Exeter, discussed the difficulty of finding Cornish learning materials for children. To fill this gap, in 2021 the Cornwall County Council launched Go Cornish, an initiative to promote Cornish language-learning in primary schools. Go Cornish materials are free, online and available to all primary schools across Cornwall. Its mission statement is to give 'every child growing up in Cornwall' the opportunity to learn Cornish language and heritage ('First Go Cornish Schools'). Since its launch in June 2021, over 40 primary schools across Cornwall have signed up for the programme ('What is Go Cornish?'). The Go Cornish initiative represents a significant step towards ensuring that the Cornish language is passed on to the next generation ('First Go Cornish Schools'). As part of the project, Go Cornish also produced six storybooks called *Tales from Porth* by Will Coleman. Further afield, children's books in Cornish have been slowly trickling into the scene. Kowethas an Yeth Kernewek, a charity promoting the Cornish language, has been bringing out material for children in Cornish since at least 1994, with about ten texts produced since then including songbooks, colouring and short story books (Sandercock 1994; Hodge 1995; Webb 2006; James 2012; Simpson 2017; Vafanda 2019; Gainey 2020; Parry n.d; Edwards 2021). Small press Spyrys a Gernow comes in second with four texts spanning comics, colouring books and fairy tales (Young 1999; Timms and Tucker 2002; Roberts n.d; Jory, 2018). Kesva has done little in this area

in terms of physical book production, bringing only one book out (Page 2012). Here, five independent organizations come in: one-woman bilingual publisher, West Country Giants, printed two colouring books in 2001 (Butler). Noonvares Press, a self-publisher, printed two books of children's fiction in 2003 and 2008 (Trevenen Jenkin). Both Ors Sempel and Granny Moff Books, Judy Scrimshaw's self-publisher, brought out an illustrated children's book, the former in 2014 (Harris) and the latter in 2018. Other charitable organizations have occasionally made an impact. For example, in 2012, Movyans Skolyow Meythrin, an organization promoting the use of Cornish in primary schools, issued a book of Cornish songs: *Keur Kernewek*.

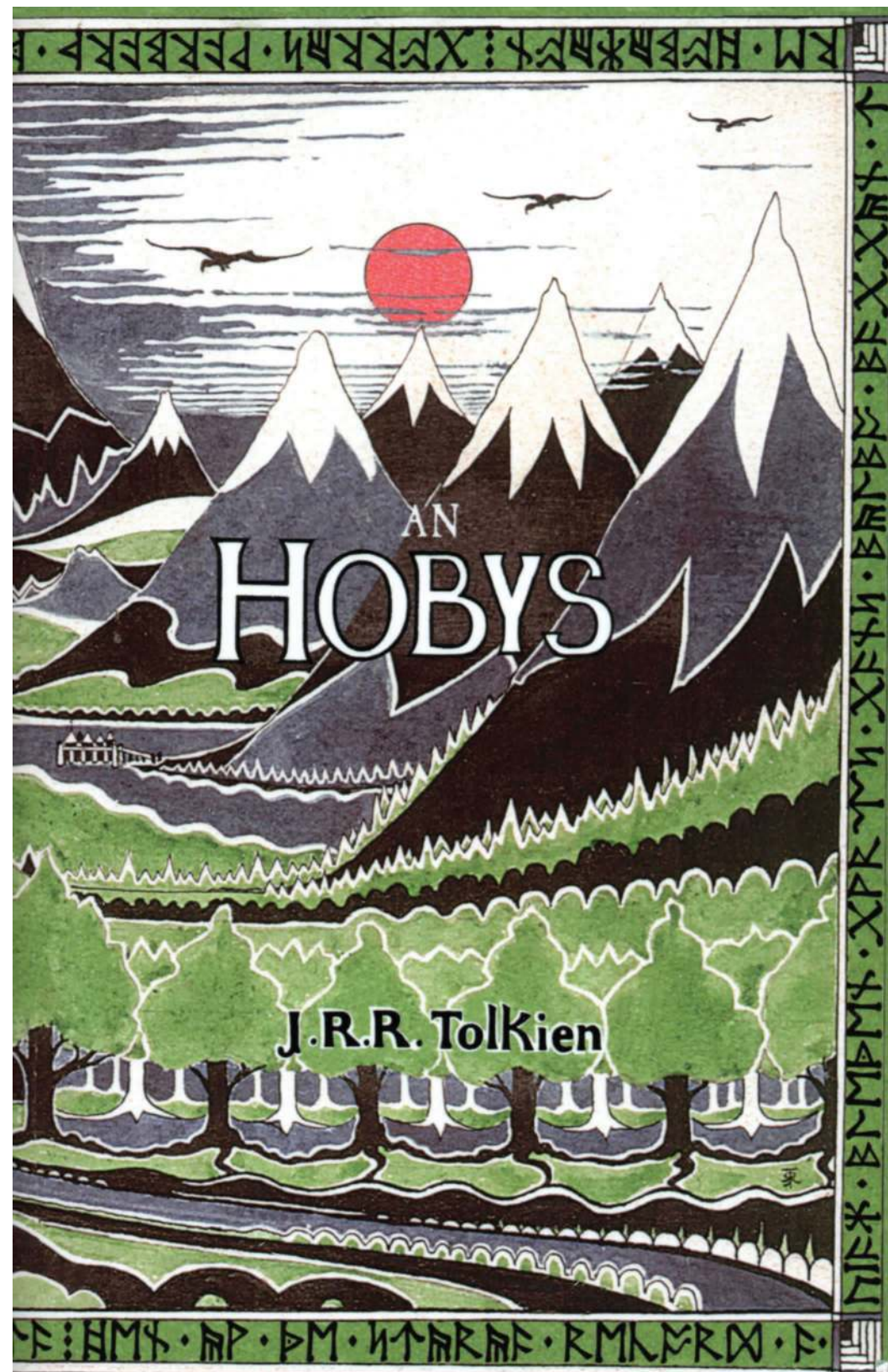
Putting this all together, at least twenty-eight books can be counted. It is a momentous achievement for a language once at the brink of extinction. Translations are also a significant way to boost the availability of children's books. Evertype has cornered the market, bringing thirteen classic children's novels and a compilation of nine stories into Cornish (Carroll 2009 and 2015; Treadwell and Free 2009; Verne 2009; Stevenson 2010; Kent 2011; Conan Doyle 2012; Nesbit 2012; Grahame 2013; Tolkien 2014; Stevenson 2015; Stoker 2015; Baum 2017; Collodi 2018). Kowethas an Yeth Kernewek has six translated children's books on its list (Dickens 2011; Hill 2012 and 2013; Adamson 2014), Kesva three (Carroll 2014; Milne 2015), and Agan Tavas two (Rayner 2021; Donaldson 2022). Small independent Welsh publisher Dalen Kernow has added translations of two titles from Hergé's Tintin series to its list (2014 and 2015). Even Edition Tintenfaß, a press that specializes exclusively in translations of *Le Petit Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, brought out a Cornish version in 2010.

**'The Go Cornish initiative represents a significant step towards ensuring that the Cornish language is passed on to the next generation.'**

Currently, there is little development around the continuation of Cornish Language learning at the secondary school level. According to Broadhurst, the barrier to higher-level learning is a lack of attraction to the subject at the secondary level by both students and teachers (2023). There are no official GCSE or A-level classes, so all learning must happen as an extracurricular (Sayers et al. 12-13). This is compounded by the lack of teachers with the ability to teach Cornish at a higher level. At the same time, there are few publications in Cornish geared towards teenagers. There are only two freely available to find: *Cay Byan ha'n Popynjay Gwer* by Barbara Davies, printed by Spyrys a Gernow (n.d.) and *An Kelegel/The Chalice* by Ray Clemens, an English-Cornish teen adventure novel, issued by Kowethas an Yeth Kernewek in 2018.

There is a small but dedicated number of authors bringing out new work in Cornish for adults. Truran has kept in print *An Gurun Wosek*

*Cornish language translation of The Hobbit by J.R.R. Tolkien.*



a *Geltya* by Melville Bennetto, the first novel to be published in Cornish (1984) and a bilingual reflection of the life of St. Piran (1982). Kesva has backed the work of Cornish multi-genre author Rod Lyon, printing five of his texts (2015, 2016 and 2017). They have also brought out nine other texts by a variety of authors, including short story books, plays, songbooks, poetry, and mystery and historical novels (Brown, 1999; Dyllor n.d.; George 2006; Sandercock 2013; Prys 2015; Richards 2016; Holland 2021; Hodge 2022; Chadwick 2022). Spyrys a Gernow has been an avid supporter of Myghal Palmer, especially posthumously, bringing out six of his texts (1999, 2004, 2008, 2010, 2011 and 2016), and his collaboration with Heather Ashworth (2009). It also published another of Ashworth's texts (2006), a collection of plays, short stories and poetry (Dorrell and Menhinick n.d.), and most recently a novel by Lyon (2022). Francis Boutle, an independent company dedicated to minority languages, has also recently contributed to the Cornish scene through the work of Tim Saunders, publishing three of his works (1999, 2006 and 2019), Alan M. Kent, printing a play and a poetry collection (2006 and 2021), and Mick Paynter (2011). Kowethas an Yeth Kernewek has an eclectic selection of texts: a Cornish-English history book, a poetry collection, two cookbooks and a collection of pantomimes (Hodge 1999; Snell 2007; Pascoe 2011; Parker 2012; Johns 2023). Finally, the self-publisher Noonvares Press sells a poetry collection issued in 2005 (Trevenen Jenkin). Just like in the case of children's books, there are Cornish-language translations available for adults. Once again, Everttype is the leader, with nine texts across a range of genres (Weatherhill 2009; Wells 2013; Jerome 2014; Austen 2015; Haggard 2016; Gibran 2019; Brontë 2020; Dewi 2021; Kent 2021), and both Kowethas an Yeth Kernewek and Spyrys a Gernow have also brought out a translated text (Le Sec'h 2012; Hope 2021).

Given the specific Cornish history in relation to religion, it is no surprise that several biblical and religious texts have also been translated into the language. Spyrys a Gernow brought out *The New Testament*, translated by Nicholas Williams in 2002. This was soon superseded by Kesva's version by Wella Brown in 2004, created as part of *The Bible Project*, a collaboration between the Board and the Bishop of Truro's Ecumenical Advisory Group on Cornish-language Services (Kesva). Their first publication was *An Sowter: Book of Psalms* translated by Keith Syed (1997). The aim of this project is to produce a Bishop-approved Cornish version of the Bible and they have been periodically bringing out new sections (2010 and 2014). They were beaten to it, however, by Everttype, who published a translation by Nicholas Williams in 2011. The press had also previously brought out Williams's translation of the *Daily Prayer* in 2009. Finally, Truran has a translation of the gospel according to St. John (1984).

Children's and adult books are complemented by historical literature, thanks to a Cornish literary tradition stretching back to Medieval times. Most Cornish historical texts continue to be re-edited by Cornish-language publishers. This area is mostly dominated by Kesva and Agan Tavas. *The Prophecy of Merlin* is a twelfth century poem written by John of Cornwall in Latin with marginal notes in

Cornish. He stated that the work was a translation based on an earlier document written in the Cornish language (Faletra 306). As there is no remaining version in Cornish, Julyan Holmes translated it back into Cornish and English in 2001. Kesva has been similarly active in keeping *Pascon agan Arluth*, a religious fourteenth century Cornish poem, in circulation, reprinting it in 2008. Everttype brought out a similar translation with the addition of *The Charter Fragment*, a short poem about marriage, believed to be the earliest extant connected text in Cornish. Gorseth Kernow, an organization set up to foster good relations between Cornwall and other Celtic countries, and to encourage the study of Cornish language and culture, also issued a 200-copy limited edition in 2002. This publication placed together the *Pascon agan Arluth*, *The Charter Fragment* and an excerpt from the *Tregear Homilies*, a series of 12 Catholic sermons written in English and translated by John Tregear into Cornish in around 1560. Turning to another historical text, both Kesva and Agan Tavas have brought out versions of the Cornish *Ordinalia*, three religious plays dated around the early fifteenth century. The Cornish Language Board were reprinting these texts as early as 1982 and have continued to do so, once in 2006 and the latest, with different editions for students, in 2022. Agan Tavas has also reprinted them (2001, 2014 and 2016).

### **‘There is a small but dedicated number of authors bringing out new work in Cornish for adults.’**

The longest single surviving work of Cornish literature is *Bewnans Meryasek*, a two-day verse drama dated 1504, but probably copied from an earlier manuscript. Agan Tavas published bilingual excerpts by Robert Morton-Nance (n.d.) before reprinting the full text in 2018. Another historical work is *Bewnans Ke*, a play on the life of Saint Kea. It was written around 1500 but survives only in an incomplete manuscript from the second half of the sixteenth century, and it was only discovered in 2000. Kesva brought out an edition edited by Ken George in 2006, and a scholarly edition of the play was printed in 2007 by the University of Exeter Press in affiliation with the National Library of Wales. Another important historical Cornish text is *Gwreans an Bys*. It is a play similar to *Origo Mundi* but in a much later manuscript (1611). Truran maintains an edition by Robert Morton Nance and A. S. D. Smith (1985) and the text was re-edited by Ray Edwards for Kesva in 2000.

Later writers have not been entirely forgotten either. Truran edited a student version of the folk tale *Jowan Chy an Horth* by Nicholas Boson, one of the few surviving Cornish prose texts from the seventeenth century (1982) and two short story compilations by A. S. D. Smith (1981 and 1987). Kesva republished the same text by Boson in 2005, and in 2016 produced a compilation of the magazine *An Houlsedhas*, originally written by Robert Victor Walling, a soldier, journalist and poet, from 1916–7. Some of the work by A. S. D. Smith was also re-edited in 2010 by Everttype. In 2019, Kowethas an Yeth Kernewek reprinted *An Oerwyns*,

# A NEW CORNISH DICTIONARY GERLYVER NOWETH KERNEWEK



Morton Nance Memorial Edition  
Dyllans Covath Mordon

A New Cornish Dictionary: Morton Nance Memorial Edition by R. Morton Nance, 1999.

an autobiographical account of the Great Blizzard of 1891 by William Penrose. Francis Boutle have, instead of singular texts, dedicated themselves to three anthologies, spanning from 1549 to 2004 (1999, 2000 and 2005). The breadth of historical texts reprinted in Cornish shows how the community is aware of and building on its roots and thus has constructed a solid foundation for a linguistic and literary renaissance.

What can be said about the state of Cornish language publishing then? It appears to be a small but vibrant literary community which produces texts for a wide variety of audiences, from historical enthusiasts to new learners. Most literary mediums and genres are represented in small quantities, giving hope that each will grow into their own literary areas over time. There are, however, gaps to fill, especially regarding young adult texts. This echoes the language's need to have more of an official status in young people's education in Cornwall and more broadly in public life (*Cornish Language Strategy* 8). Cornwall County Council's 2015-2025 Cornish Language Strategy is an exciting and promising programme that looks ready to take on these challenges.

Use this QR Code to see a list of Cornish language texts:



# ‘ART IS MY CREATIVE AVENUE’

## Q&A with Becky Bettesworth, Independent Artist

Tessa Ley and Violet Berney

Local South West artist Becky Bettesworth creates modern art with a taste of nostalgia through her contemporary take on the vintage-style railway poster art of the 1930s. She draws inspiration from serene South West landscapes and a time when life sailed at a slower pace. Since rising to prominence following the release of her iconic Greenway House artwork in 2013, Bettesworth has continued to release prints of local beauty spots and has even transformed them into literary artwork. We were very lucky to have the chance to sit down with her to discuss her artistic journey.

**Violet Berney: In what ways has the landscape of the South West influenced your art?**

Becky Bettesworth: I’ve been very much inspired by my local surroundings. It is all the stunning locations of where we live, and we are fortunate that we have got an abundance of beautiful places in the South West.

**Tessa Ley: When creating your poster art, what drew you specifically to the landscape of Greenway House?**

Becky Bettesworth: I exhibited at the Cary Arms in Torquay about fifteen years ago. This exhibition was before I had a website and social media. It was very much a time when people would only see your work if they walked through the door. I thought, ‘Right, I need to exhibit to a wider audience’, and I’d heard that you could display artwork at Greenway House. I went and looked around, and I just fell in love with it; it was so enchanting and nostalgic. That is where I came up with the idea of creating the travel poster artwork. My first prints were based on Greenway House because it was such a



Bettesworth showing her cover designs for Agatha Christie’s *Dead Man’s Folly* (left) and *Five Little Pigs* (right).

perfect match. There is a rich history in that environment, in Agatha Christie herself. To artistically portray that era, the sentiments and essence in those prints, but in a modern way, fit perfectly with the environment of Greenway.

**Violet Berney: Would you be able to tell us more about your creative processes and how they translated and transitioned into book cover design?**

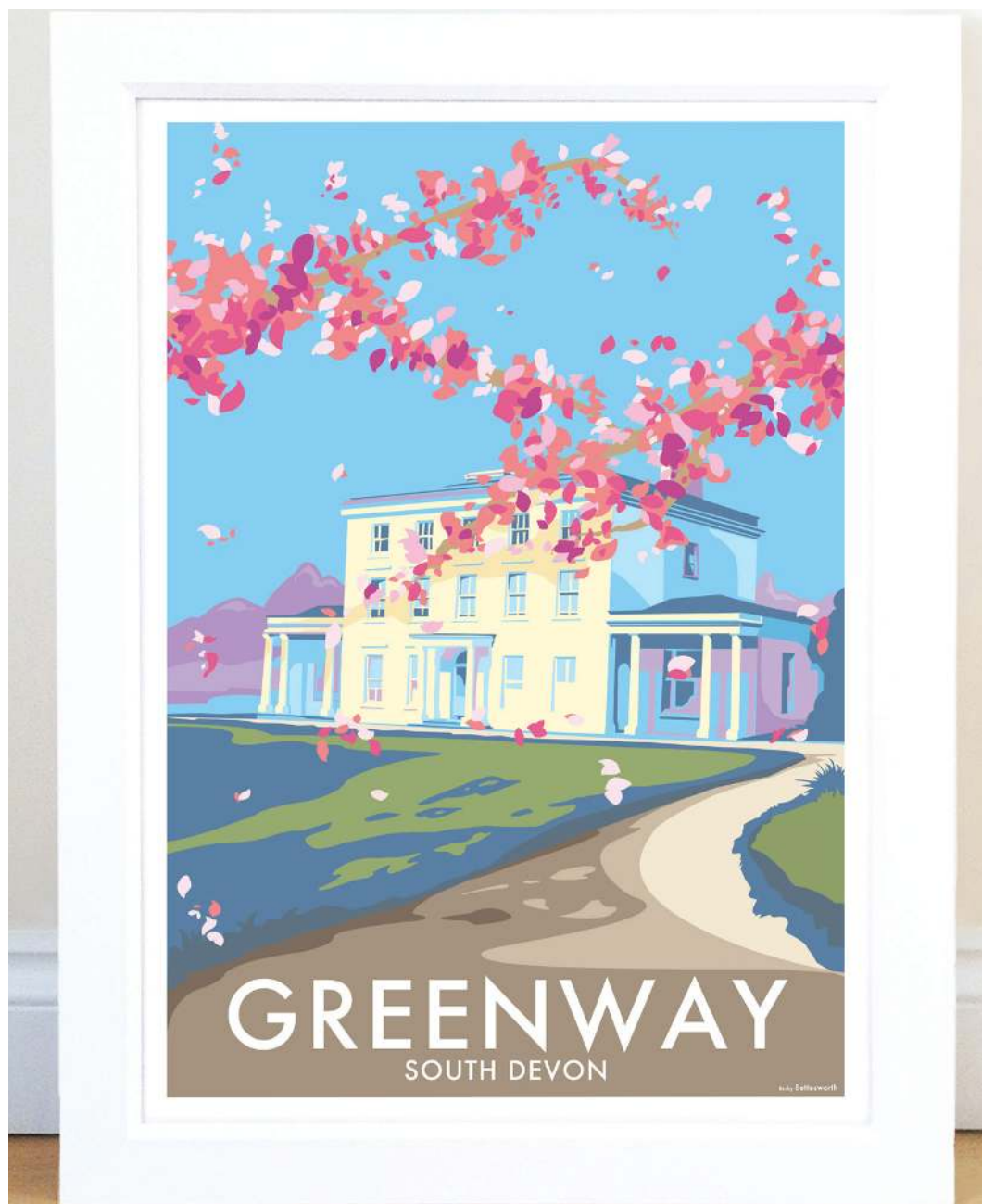
Becky Bettesworth: My first venture into book cover design was for Penguin, for the covers

of the H.E. Bates series *The Darling Buds of May*. With this series, I had five book covers to design. Generally, what happens is you get sent a very tight brief of what the publisher is envisioning, which is brilliant because they really lead and guide you artistically.

The publisher gives you the brief and then you produce a pencil drawing of an outline that gets approved. Then from there they give you a further idea of the colours and elements they want. You then provide them with another draft of what you are going to create. If that is approved, you do the work and hope it makes the final cut – which it did.

**Tessa Ley: You were commissioned to design two special edition covers for the Agatha Christie novels, *Dead Man's Folly* and *Five Little Pigs*. How did this collaboration come about?**

*Bettesworth's art print Greenway House.*



Becky Bettesworth: As I had done an exhibition at Greenway House, I had a good relationship with the shop, who went on to ask me to supply them with my prints and posters. So, because I had done these prints, HarperCollins and the Agatha Christie family knew about me, my artwork and how popular it was with locals and tourists alike. When they decided they wanted to do hardback special editions of the *Dead Man's Folly* and *Five Little Pigs* novels, there was an already established connection to me. It was really organic and worked out so well because they were based from my existing prints and adapted and recreated for the book covers. I felt honoured and lucky that they chose me to do the artwork for these novels, rather than someone with no connection to the South West or Agatha Christie.

**'I've been very much inspired by my local surroundings. It is all the stunning locations of where we live...'**

**Violet Berney: How did you decide what elements you wanted to adapt from your original prints for these book covers?**

Becky Bettesworth: The brief the publisher gave me for *Dead Man's Folly* asked for the image of Greenway House I had already done, but to add a marquee on the front lawn to signify that a party had been taking place. They also wanted the driveway to look more sinister, suggesting something

might have happened. They wanted the essence to be the beautiful house, and it was perfect because that is what my original print was. I knew I could adapt it accordingly because my picture was so iconically Greenway in its essence and form. The same was the case with the brief for the *Five Little Pigs* cover; they wanted it to feature an abandoned artist's easel, overlooking the river with boats sailing past. Again, my original print was perfect because of the imagery and the colours; that is what they wanted and it just worked so well. Both books are so beautiful and tactile. With them being hardbacks, the texture is really lovely, and they've got glitter spot varnish on them. They are both so pretty!

**Tessa Ley: How did it feel to be involved with someone like Agatha Christie, who is so iconic within the South West, but also on such a global scale?**

Becky Bettesworth: It is incredible; I feel really proud. I remember thinking, 'That would look beautiful'. I just knew it would work, and it was such a great marriage of ideas and visuals. Agatha Christie, she's this global icon. People are so passionate: there is a real love for her books, and for Greenway and for everything about her. She was creatively inspired by looking at the natural surroundings of where she lived, which is really no different from me now, but in a modern sense. I often wonder and think, 'I hope she'd be really proud of it,' because she was a remarkable woman.

**Violet Berney: In terms of creative freedom, how did you find the difference between designing a book cover vs creating your own prints?**

**‘Christie was creatively inspired by looking at the natural surroundings of where she lived, which is really no different from me now’**

Becky Bettesworth: It is an interesting one, because when I'm creating my prints, I am the client. I am in charge, and it is very much led by what I want to do creatively. And it is a lot simpler because I have my own creative flow, and I am in charge of how I want the final product to be. However, when you have a client, they determine how they want it to be. You may come up with an idea and create something, but then the client may ask you to change it. Sometimes, that can be challenging. Luckily, with the Agatha Christie books, they were happy with what I had created, and they didn't want me to change anything. We were both coming from the same angle; they knew what

they wanted, and the images were exactly right. It was really effortless and joyous to be involved with. It would be lovely if there were more editions to the collection, but we'll have to wait and see.

**Tessa Ley: With your connection to the South West, is there an opportunity for future crossover and collaboration with the literary networks here?**

Becky Bettesworth: Definitely! I was involved with the Appledore Book Festival a while back in North Devon. The organizers of the book festival asked me if I had created a print of Appledore, and at that stage I hadn't, but I knew I could. So I created a print, and they wanted to use it on the front cover of the festival brochure. The opportunity developed really organically. Both avenues – literature and the visual arts – create a story in their writing or their picture; so it is wonderful that those two can match and combine. I am dyslexic and have always found reading hard – art is my creative avenue. I suppose for writers like Agatha Christie, they are also inspired by these South West landscapes, but in a different form. When those forms can come together, it is really wonderful.

**Violet Berney: Lastly, are there any other projects that you are working on at the moment that you could talk about?**

Becky Bettesworth: It is interesting. I can feel my development as an artist. I started working in acrylic and pastel, doing a different art style. Then, I started creating the pictures of Greenway and my travel posters, which snowballed into the merry little business I run now. So, now I am at a new crossroads or a development stage. I could carry on and do more poster prints, but I feel like there is another new stage for me to move on to. I don't know what that is going to be yet, but it is going to be quite an exciting time to experiment. There is more scope for something new and different. I am hoping to be involved with the Children's South West Hospice, an amazing charity. I've got some ideas, but nothing has been put down yet. I am very open to have things develop and evolve if new ideas come up. We'll see!

*If you would like to learn more about Becky Bettesworth or are interested in buying her stunning artwork you can find at:  
<https://beckybettesworth.co.uk>*



# CELEBRATING DIVERSITY AND ACCESSIBILITY

## Uniting Voices at Bristol's Lyra Poetry Festival

Katie Scott in collaboration with Becky Miles

In the heart of the culturally vibrant city of Bristol, the Lyra Festival, which first took place in 2019, stands as a testament to the transformative power of poetry and the celebration of diverse voices. Recently commemorating its fifth consecutive year, the festival has become a cherished space for poetry enthusiasts and newcomers alike, creating an environment of diversity and accessibility. With the resonant theme of the 'City of Words' at its forefront in the 2023 edition, the festival beautifully wove together Bristol's rich history and its dynamic present, inviting attendees to embark on a poetic journey through the city's soul. Amidst the captivating verses and spirited performances, the festival's unwavering commitment to inclusivity shone brightly, reflecting the magnetic and boundary-transcending nature of poetry itself. As the festival continues to evolve, its dedication to providing a welcoming space for all remains steadfast, reinforcing its position as a platform that amplifies the voices and experiences of a diverse and vibrant community. Co-founders Lucy English and Danny Pandolfi have consistently upheld a commitment to inclusivity, placing it at the core of the festival's mission. In their annual efforts, English and Pandolfi persistently endeavour to integrate advanced digital technology, create additional physical access points, and surmount obstacles that hinder the participation of both audiences and writers. The overarching goal remains focused on fostering engagement and ensuring that all forms of barriers to inclusivity are effectively addressed.

### ACCESSIBILITY & LYRA FESTIVAL 2023

In their approach to organizing the festival, the team carefully consider how to ensure that all participants can immerse themselves in the cultural tapestry of the city. Chosen for their historical significance, the thirteen festival locations for 2023 served as key points along this dynamic route and importantly were all wheelchair accessible. The music venue St George's, which hosted several writing workshops, poetry slams and young people's performances, was celebrating its 200-year anniversary. Similarly, 257-year-old theatre the Bristol Old Vic featured a night showcasing Caribbean poetry and music. Spanning nine days, the festival

included thirty engaging events such as two walking tours, seven performances, three open mics, poetry slams, eight workshops, a poetry exhibition, public talks, panels, and Q&As. It also featured local and international poets, with writers from New Zealand, Barbados, Germany, and Malaysia performing alongside those from the Bristol scenes.



*Lyra Bristol Poetry Festival 2023.*

The Lyra programme was thoughtfully planned to accommodate individuals of all abilities. From the details surrounding the accessibility of the terrain for the walking tours, to the chosen thirteen locations, every consideration solidified Lyra Festival's reputation as an event that prioritizes creating a welcoming space for all. This is particularly important to Lyra's founders as Pandolfi explains, 'It just keeps coming back to that idea of how can we get people to find an access point into poetry'. Pandolfi's words speak to the ethos of Lyra, highlighting the importance of facilitating people's connection with poetry and acknowledging its potential to foster change and empowerment within individuals and communities.

The accessibility information found front and centre on Lyra Festival's website is a detailed pack that contains a fifteen-page document which provides individuals with all the information that they might need to be able to attend the event. This reflects the organization's proactive approach to fostering inclusivity and ensuring that the event is accessible to a diverse range of attendees. The pack encompasses a wide range of details, including, but not limited to, wheelchair accessibility, parking arrangements, sign language interpretation services, and any accommodations for individuals with sensory sensitivities. This proactive approach aligns with platforms like [theinklusionguide.org](http://theinklusionguide.org), which serve as centralized hubs fostering awareness and understanding of diverse needs. The guide offers practical insights, ranging from physical considerations to advice on inclusive communication strategies and the utilization of assistive technologies. Such concerted efforts not only enrich the festival experience but also contribute to creating an inclusive space for everyone involved.

In a world where creative arts can feel 'exclusive', Lyra breaks down these walls. Another way in which Lyra works to make its programme inclusive is by including many events that are low cost, or even free. In the 2023 programme ten of the events were free, with other events costing as little as £3. The highest entry cost was £10. But what is really special about Lyra is how it involves its audience. It is not just about attending; it is about participating. Whether it is voting for the 'wildcard finalist' in the online poetry slam qualifiers or diving into workshops, it is all about creating a community of creativity. This active engagement blurs the line between the audience and the poets, turning passive watching into active involvement, making poetry and the arts more open and inclusive for everyone.

Additionally, Lyra both celebrates established poets and champions emerging voices. After all, the poetry landscape is incredibly diverse, and Lyra Festival provides a platform for that. This can be seen through Lyra Festival's celebration of Bristol's linguistic diversity, with poets presenting in Somali, the third most spoken language in the city. Championing such diversity is vital in today's society and creates a space where all stories can be told. Lyra also ensures that British Sign Language (BSL) and closed caption events are included within the programme, with the option of watching some of the events online – further connecting the world in a multitude of ways. Headlining the multilingual poetry event at Lyra Festival 2023 was distinguished poet DL Williams who demonstrates an immense talent and vision. They stand at the front line of the movement, ready to celebrate BSL, with work hailing from their collection *Interdimensional Traveller* published by the independent South West-based publisher Burning Eye Books. DL Williams explores the intersection of BSL and English, cleverly crafting a bridge between communities with a shared love for creative expression. As such, Lyra Festival continues to break barriers and emphasize that nobody should miss the beauty of poetry.

## COLLABORATORS

Collaboration lies at the heart of the Lyra Bristol Poetry Festival, with a network of esteemed partners and collaborators joining hands to weave an intricate tapestry of poetic expression and community engagement. From local artistic institutions to global literary pioneers, the festival's collaborators embody a shared commitment to fostering a diverse and inclusive creative space, nurturing a platform that amplifies the voices and narratives of both emerging and established poets.

Creative force Malaika Kegode was crowned as the Lyra Festival Poet 2023, and headlined a writing workshop, whilst also taking part in other events such as a reading and a performance. Kegode's journey is a testament to her unshakable determination as an artist. She is the co-founder of Milk Poetry and her debut poetry collection *Requite* was also published by Burning Eye Books who publish

*Lyra Bristol Poetry Festival 2023.*





Lyra Bristol Poetry Festival 2023.

many spoken word artists. She debuted her powerful autobiographical piece *Outlier* about addiction and isolation on the prestigious main stage of the Bristol Old Vic in 2021, leaving audiences captivated. The success of the show marked a milestone in Kegode's career, strengthening her position as a trailblazer within the contemporary performance and literary space – pushing boundaries across poetry, theatre, radio, and film. In a city as culturally rich and diverse as Bristol, she stands as a symbol of the artistic vibrancy that blooms in its midst. It is unsurprising that Lyra Festival crowned Kegode as the 'poet of the festival' given the ways in which her career speaks to the ethos Lyra works to promote.

One of the regular supporters of the Lyra Festival is a West Midlands-based company Nine Arches Press. Nine Arches Press is a publishing house within the Inpress group and is partially funded by Arts Council England. They currently have a mentoring scheme for poets called Primers, alongside running their *Under the Radar* magazine which is published three times a year.

Even though Nine Arches Press is based in the West Midlands, the fact that they work so closely with South West-based companies like Lyra make them vital to the growth of the publishing community being built in the South West. This seamless fit and ease of support is clearly helped by the shared values between Lyra and Nine Arches Press, not only shown in the actions they take to support and engage with disadvantaged writers and readers, but also within the topics included in their 2023 publishing list. Climate change and queer perspectives on nature fit well with the focus of other publishers and writers within the South

West, showing that sometimes ethical alignment is more fitting and beneficial than simply geographical location.

Nine Arches Press have participated in the 2019, 2022 and 2023 Lyra festivals. 2019 saw a reading by Nine Arches Press author Tom Sastry which also showcased two additional authors from the press: Suzannah Evans and Jo Bell. Sastry returned during the 2022 festival to perform as part of the Under the Red Guitar poetry and open mic night. Additionally in 2022, spoken word poet and member of the Primers mentoring scheme Stanley Iyanu was a featured poet at an open mic night for local Bristol talent, and Nine Arches Press author Jacqueline Saphra was a key participant in a reading and discussion of twenty-first century sonnets. Finally, Caleb Parkin, the 2020 City Poet for Bristol, participated both in 2022 and 2023, respectively. Not only is he published by Nine Arches Press, but he is currently a fellow University of Exeter student carrying out his PhD; this speaks to the importance of highlighting amazing talent and publishing connections which can remain hidden within the South West.

At Lyra Festival 2023, as a poet, performer, and now facilitator, Parkin graced the stage, captivating audiences with his distinct poetic style. He also contributed significantly to the festival's direction as part of its steering committee, delving into themes of social justice, environmental sustainability, and the complexities of human relationships. Parkin's evocative poetry explores pressing societal concerns, urging introspection and societal reassessment. Beyond artistry, Parkin champions change, nurturing vital dialogues often overlooked. *This Fruiting Body*, published by Nine Arches Press, amplifies marginalized voices, intertwining themes of identity, environmental consciousness, and social equity, aligning seamlessly with Lyra's ethos of inclusivity and societal change. Parkin's words, both on and offstage, embody the festival's commitment to fostering dialogue and advocating for an interconnected and compassionate world.

Another important supporter of the festival is the organization Apples and Snakes. Not only are they England's leading spoken word poetry organization, but they are also a National Portfolio Organization and a registered charity. Based in south-east

Lyra Bristol Poetry Festival 2023.



London, Apples and Snakes have been working hard for thirty–five years to create inspiring experiences while bringing together essential voices in innovative ways. They run a Book a Poet scheme in which people can hire poets for workshops, performances, events in schools and workplaces, and even for commissioning poetry. Alongside this scheme, they also hold their own workshops covering a wide variety of topics and even run their own podcast. Additionally, they run many collaborative projects which aim to help diversify children’s literature and support aspiring young poets. They are incredibly passionate about maintaining and supporting diversity, particularly amplifying the voices of people of colour, not just in the people they hire and support but also in the ways they participate and give back to communities.

Although Apples and Snakes are based in London, their work has been incredibly beneficial in helping the growth of South West–based creatives. For their fortieth anniversary this year, Apples and Snakes ran a masterclass called Future Voices. This project selected forty emerging poets to nurture and help them grow their own talent. The cohort from the South West was selected in collaboration with Milk Poetry and many of the poets chosen had previously been involved with the Lyra Festival. Jonah Corren, who has been published by Nine Arches Press; Jo Eades, who was published in the Walking Worlds collection which was curated for Lyra Festival 2023; Lesley Hayes, a two–time Grand Slam finalist at Lyra Festival; and Elena Chamberlain, who is also a Grand Slam finalist. Apples and Snakes have been a vital partner for Lyra, sponsoring and partnering for every festival since its creation in 2019. During the 2019 festival, they collaborated with Simon Mole and Gecko to create a rap festival event. During the 2022 and 2023 festivals, Apples and Snakes ran a free poetry day retreat at Hamilton House in Bristol. This included both in–person and online activities to increase the accessibility for as many people as possible to attend.

**‘They are incredibly passionate about maintaining and supporting diversity, particularly amplifying the voices of people of colour, not just in the people they hire and support but also in the ways they participate and give back to communities.’**

One author and performer who has worked closely with both Apples and Snakes and Lyra festival is Vanessa Kisuule. Kisuule is based in Bristol and has previously taken on the prestige of being Bristol’s City Poet (2018–2020). She also has worked closely with Burning Eye Books to publish two poetry collections. Since taking on the role of City Poet, she has done an incredible number of things to help make poetry more accessible and open to all kinds of people in Bristol. Currently

she facilitates workshops for Bristol Young City Poets – a scheme launched by Lyra Festival to provide workshops to people aged fourteen to seventeen within secondary schools and community groups. These workshops aim to ‘engage young people with self-expression, public speaking, and self-empowerment through the medium of spoken work and poetry, inviting young people to write about what Bristol means to them’ (Hear Their Voices). These workshops directly build on workshops carried out by Kisuule as Bristol’s City Poet during the 2019 Lyra Festival. Yet these workshops are not the only way that Kisuule has engaged with Lyra; in 2021 she carried out a group performance titled STILL I RISE: Poetry and Resistance. And significantly, she was also a headliner for Lyra Slam in 2023 which took place over Zoom, again to increase the reach of poets and listeners alike.

The Lyra Bristol Poetry Festival is a testament to the power of words bridging the divides and unifying voices from all different walks of life. This assertion that poetry belongs to all is a testament to the belief that barriers should be removed, and the beauty of verse should be shared everywhere. It is a manifestation of the belief that poetry is a tapestry woven from the threads of human experience. What makes Lyra different is its resolute commitment to accessibility, inclusivity and working to achieve that through collaboration. Crucially, the festival ensures that everyone, regardless of their physical abilities, can participate in the celebration of poetry. All venues used are wheelchair accessible, signifying a dedication to opening the doors of culture to everyone. It is opening its doors wide and saying, ‘This is your poetry festival too’, and that deserves respect and applause. Poetry should be accessible, and through Lyra Festival’s vision, they have shown that it can be.



# ‘THE SHELVES ARE FILLED WITH ALL THIS FASCINATING CONTENT’

## Q&A with Linda Cleary of Hypatia Publications

Ruth Kell

In recent years, we have witnessed an increase in the number of women-led spaces popping up, offering room for women of all ages to feel safe and supported. This has, of course, bled into the literary realm. The likes of Persephone Books in Bath have gained Instagram fame for their beautiful books, feminist environment and passion for uplifting minority voices. But what about those less visible in the South West with the same mission?

I sat down with Linda Cleary, Growth and Expansion Lead for Hypatia Trust – a charity dedicated to women’s equality and the celebration of the literary, artistic and scientific works of women – to discuss the Trust’s work and mission. Before stepping into this role, Linda oversaw the creation and curation of the literary department of Hypatia Trust’s small press: Hypatia Publications. Running from 2019–2022, the published projects celebrate women with ties to Cornwall through poetry, short stories and novels. Everything the Trust and press embodies is dedicated to the preservation of female voices and the goal of celebrating and inserting women into fields where they are traditionally excluded. Here, Cleary and I discuss her journey into publishing, the missions of the press and Trust, and the continued struggle of being a micro-press in an increasingly hostile, capitalist world.

**Ruth Kell: Could you start by telling us about how you began working for Hypatia Trust and why it was an initiative that you were drawn to?**

Linda Cleary: My history with Hypatia Trust goes back a long way because I knew Dr Melissa Hardie-Budden, the founder and director. I knew her for a few decades before she died in 2022. I have my own company, Free Writers Centre, where I offer courses, work as an editor and coach writers. I lived in Egypt between 2009 and 2015 and when I got back, I met with Melissa and she allowed me to run my creative writing courses at Hypatia Trust. She gave me a small stipend which allowed me to provide reduced rates for participants. So, we all got a good deal out of it: Hypatia Trust got increased footfall and I could run my courses with reduced rates for attendees. This happened for about eighteen months.

**Ruth Kell: What do you think makes female-only literary spaces so important? How is Hypatia Trust different from other female-oriented literary networks like Persephone Books in Bath?**

Linda Cleary: We actually have several Persephone books in the archive at our Hypatia Trust headquarters, so there is a network there too. Unfortunately, women are still under-represented within many roles, but certainly within the literary and publishing industry. That is something that still needs to level up. Until we get more people within the industry who are

opening the gates and taking some risks, are we ever going to get there? Who knows? I think there is still a status quo within the Big Five and other leading publishing houses where people are unwilling to take risks. Hence, we have real trouble even getting our titles into the local and regional bookshops. People still make judgements based on something coming out of a small press or written by someone they have never heard of. It is very important to me, as a writer myself, that this changes. I want to help emerging writers step out and get published, but the missing link is who else will open those doors for them.

With the bookshop, an idea conceived by our manager Miki Ashton, we have created this amazing space to celebrate female authors. I’ve not been to Persephone Books so I can’t say how it differs atmospherically, but we are one of only about five exclusively female-author-led spaces. It is important, it is great. You go in and the shelves are filled with women authors, not just our own publications but those donated by the public too. The shelves are filled with all this fascinating content!

**Ruth Kell: You've created this safe space for women to feel visible and celebrated in the bookshop and through your publications. I can also see you have a queer book club to extend the same space to queer communities. Is the same space and support extended to trans women and non-binary people? How do you approach these social needs as they increasingly find safety in literary spheres?**

Linda Cleary: Yes, absolutely. We are a trans-inclusive space. Hopefully we will one day reach a space in the world where that is taken as a given. Unfortunately, we aren't there yet. The trans conversation is prominent at the moment with a lot of conflict and hurt attached to it, but we are absolutely a safe and trans-inclusive space.

It is important to us that people have their space, their voices and their representation. It is great that we have the queer book club that meets every last Saturday of the month and is well attended – this was set up by the group themselves and we rent the

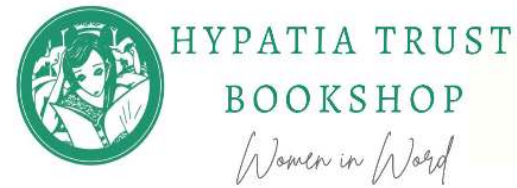
**'We are absolutely a safe and trans-inclusive space. It is important to us that people have their space, their voices and their representation.'**

space to them. Hypatia Trust is a space where anyone can come and say, 'Can I set something up?' or 'Could I try this event?'. As Growth and Expansion lead, I was recently involved in updating our business plan and we have created a policy to have it stated that we are an inclusive space.

**Ruth Kell: You worked in particular on curating a literary fiction department for Hypatia Publications from 2019 to 2022, which marked a swerve from the press's established list of non-fiction publications. How did this project come about?**

Linda Cleary: Melissa wanted the publishing arm of Hypatia Trust – Hypatia Publications – to restart, as it had been dormant for a long time, and she asked me if I would step up to do that. The press had previously done a whole load of non-fiction, academic and more social titles, but I am a fiction person. So, I thought if I can take it in this other direction then I'd be happy to give it a try. That is what happened. In 2019, I managed to get some funding for Hypatia Trust from Cultivator Cornwall and I got a mentor in Philippa Brewster, who is a literary agent and set up Pandora Press. She famously published Jeanette Winterson's debut novel *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit* in 1985. With her guidance I was able to start the literary department.

**Ruth Kell: The press engages with several genres, from poetry to short stories and novels. Was this something important to you when you were curating it?**



Interior of the Hypatia Trust's women writers bookshop *Women in Word*, located on Chapel Street in Penzance.

Linda Cleary: Definitely! It began with *Invisible Borders*, a modern anthology of twenty-three women connected to Cornwall, both emerging and established as writers. This was the one funded by Cultivator Cornwall. In that anthology we have poetry and short stories, and the book was awarded the 2021 Holyer an Gof Award for best poetry book. I handled all of this: I pulled in the writers and did every aspect of it apart from the cover design. I was doing developmental editing, copy-editing and proofing. I was even doing layout and InDesign. I was working with the printers – a whole range of stuff.

After that it was Natasha Carthew's *Born Between Crosses*. She emailed us asking if we would be interested in her new poetry and short story work. Then there was Rupam Baoni with *chronicles of entering my body*, which is poetry and art and was showcased at the

National Poetry Library. *Whistling Jack*, the novel by Josephine Gardiner, was the last. I had worked with Josephine for some time on the manuscript as a developmental editor via the Free Writers Centre. I thought this really is a fantastic novel, I really want it to go out into the world – can we be the people to do that? And Josephine, like most writers, wanted to get the work out there; we succeeded in that. That was the last one before I stepped away from curating because the amount of work needed is immense. If you are not funded (as a press), it is practically impossible.

**Ruth Kell: Writers that you mentioned like Rupam Baoni are becoming increasingly celebrated nationally and further afield, and are being shortlisted for various prizes. Do you find this validates Hypatia Publications as a publisher? How have you forged those literary networks?**

Linda Cleary: Definitely. The publications certainly all do that. I just wish that we had been able to pull in more funding and attention so that the work could continue. All of us in Hypatia Trust are only doing four or five hours a week and there isn't the funding to maintain projects of this size and to take things as far as one would like. We can't go around to the book fairs, thoroughly saturate the market or bring things to sufficient attention. Even at grassroots level, trying to get local and regional bookshops to stock the items is exhausting. There is very little take-up from bookshops. People have suggested working with Gardners – the independent network

that places books in shops. But you must have sold X number of books and X number of titles. For a micro-press, you are up against a colossal amount of things. Every title that came out of the literary department, and the non-fiction that came before that, deserves to go further. You only have six months after the publication of a title to gain traction; beyond that people aren't interested any more. You've got this tiny amount of time to do all this work against the industry, which isn't really bothered because it is the industry. Unless something goes viral, which doesn't happen often, it is really hard.

**'Every title that came out of the literary department, and the non-fiction that came before that, deserves to go further.'**

Rupam has been able to do a lot with her own networks as she was already known through endeavours like *Wasafiri* and she was able to build on them herself. Natasha did a lot of advertising for *Born Between Crosses* and *Whistling Jack* by Josephine Gardiner was chosen as the 2022 Cream of Cornish by the North Cornwall Book Festival. But *Invisible Borders* happened during the pandemic, so we couldn't have our launch party. We could've had one online, but we preferred to wait to see if we could have one in real life, which we then couldn't due to the lockdown continuing.

Our bookshop, Women in Word, has been able to rejuvenate some of the titles. We've been able to further things through the bookshop and still bring

them to people's attention, but every published book deserved a lot more than it received.

**Ruth Kell: In what other ways did the pandemic affect the press or the reach of your communities?**

Linda Cleary: Honestly, it didn't really affect the press because it was all essentially me doing everything on my laptop. So, I did that from anywhere and everywhere. My meetings with Philippa Brewster, my mentor, were mostly on Zoom, the same with the rest of the team. If I needed to

contact the writers, then it was mainly emails – lots of emails.

By the time everything had calmed down and restrictions had lifted, we were able to open the bookshop. But there was still a caution there, in that it affected the events at Hypatia Trust. We had to consider how much space we needed to ensure space between chairs, how to ventilate etc. We have a large space we use for film viewings and things, but it is not huge. We can only sit around forty people, and that is without social distancing. So, the size of events was affected for a while which in turn affected one of our main streams of income for a considerable time.

**Ruth Kell: Do you think that, through support from the bookshop or**

**even this publication, more could be published in this space in the future? What do you think is the future for Hypatia Publications' literary fiction department?**

Linda Cleary: I wouldn't say that this is definitely the end of the department, but we are so much more aware of costs now. At a basic level it costs about £5,000 per title, not including marketing and everything required after to get the book out. That is probably an under-

**'We of course only put on events that are in tune with our policies and mission statement.'**

representation of the cost. You've got to sell so many books to even recoup – it is insane. This is why so many presses are closing. On Twitter just last week I saw maybe two or three small presses that were more advanced than us closing down; it is really upsetting. I wouldn't say that this is it, but we would need to get some proper funding, which is a whole process.

With our events, people often rent our space themselves and pay room fees that go towards our running costs because we are not actually funded as an organization. We really benefit from this and from any donations. This and every sale in the bookshop goes towards our running costs. The bookshop itself is staffed mainly by a wonderful team of volunteers. So, we have the bookshop sales and room fees, and then people can put on their own events and support us in that way. However, we of course

only put on events that are in tune with our policies and mission statement. On top of this, we also run our own events.

**Ruth Kell: The environment and sustainability have become topics of importance in publishing, especially in small presses. Generally, Cornwall is very dedicated to the preservation of and connection to its beautiful landscapes. How did Hypatia Publications approach this during production and its direction?**

Linda Cleary: In terms of the actual production, the printing was done by Headland Printers here in Penzance, who have their own ethos around sustainability. On the imprint page of our books, we cite the printing process and its sustainability. We often use paper that has gone through some kind of recycling process. *Invisible Borders* also has an eBook and an audiobook. These digital aspects allow people to not even engage with print. It is definitely an ongoing conversation in terms of all our lives. We are forever around paper. As a reader, I still read hard copies and don't

enjoy digital reading outside of editing. I enjoy reading something physical in my hands. We have to question at what point that becomes problematic.

**Ruth Kell: I can see from your website how passionate Hypatia Trust is about maintaining its Cornish roots and its connection with the South West. How did that alter your curation process for the press?**

Linda Cleary: In terms of curating the titles, it was very important to me and remains important within Hypatia Publications that the women we are publishing have a strong link to Cornwall. That can range from being born here, living here for a long time or having had a significant event or link here. In June 2023 I put together a small literary fest, Women in Word, at Hypatia Trust. Karen Smith, our

was more important for the women behind the films to have those links and see all of those differences in content. I think that is what is important to me as a curator: you can have the same link or similar links, but the variation of content is fascinating.

**Ruth Kell: You do lots of wonderful events like Women in Word. Looking at the big Hypatia Trust picture, the Trust raises women up, makes them feel visible and promotes equality. Is the Trust working on any new events or initiatives that our readers may be interested in?**

Linda Cleary: The next venture that we are seeking funding and donations for is a podcast series: Women in Sound. Astra and Amy have been interning with us from Falmouth University and have already piloted two podcast episodes

**‘Women are under-represented in many technical aspects of life, especially film. The curation of the poetry film night was about attracting women who had links to Cornwall.’**

writer in residence, created some of her work for Schist in Cornwall. We also put together a women’s poetry film event, curated by myself, Lally MacBeth and Sarah Tremlett, because women are under-represented in many technical aspects of life, especially film. The curation of the poetry film night was about attracting women who had links to Cornwall. The films themselves didn’t have to be set in Cornwall or have this rural setting; it

featuring women in various fields, such as food and dance. They want to do a year of this as a twelve-episode podcast series, with one release every month. Hopefully we can hook up with some people in the South West who would support us or help us with this, as well as funders.

We have also continued to work on our Women in Cornwall interactive hub – this was set up as Melissa’s last big project;

it is a resource and research tool that links to the archive history of Hypatia Trust. The work is being taken forward by one of our team, Alice Mount.

There was a good reception at the poetry film event as part of the Women in Word festival in June. In the future, I’d like to strengthen that and do more with poetry, film or multi-discipline literary arts. We showcased fifteen films by fourteen women who were connected to the South West; it shows how many women are out there creating content. When they feel that it is a safe space where they can try something out, it increases how many people will respond. It is about having an experimental space. Who knows, if we manage to increase funding or donations, I’d like to think that we could have another publication.

*If you wish to support the work of Hypatia Trust or learn more about the Press, you can head to their website for details: [hypatia-trust.org.uk](https://hypatia-trust.org.uk)*

*You can read more on Hypatia Publications’ four literary fiction releases here: <https://hypatia-trust.org.uk/publishing> and see all the press’s titles here: <https://hypatia-trust.org.uk/bookshop>*

*Details of the Hypatia Trust archives are here: <https://hypatia-trust.org.uk/hypatias-collections>*

*Women in Cornwall website here: <https://womenincornwall.org/>*



# AFRICA WRITES - EXETER

## An Emerging Live Literature Classic in the South West

Israel Peters

When you think of a literary festival, what comes to mind? Presumably, you imagine a range of events that bring your favourite authors into somewhat relational proximity to you, while offering you the opportunity to network with other attendees. Beyond these immediate personal benefits, however, literary festivals bring other significant contributions to the broader literary space. This article proposes two value-based metrics for evaluating a literary festival and considering their role in contemporary publishing: personal value and extended cultural value. Personal value can be thought of as the immediate entertainment and overall experience you receive when you attend a literary festival. Extended cultural value is, instead, the broader societal impact of a festival. Literary festivals are a prominent part of the broad publishing and literary space and viewing them through these value lenses can help us highlight the vital interactions that occur when we come together to celebrate literature. I take Africa Writes – Exeter as a case study to demonstrate how these metrics play out, as it is a festival that provides literary enthusiasts with rich, immersive experiences while creating added value with broad sociocultural implications.

Africa Writes – Exeter is a ‘satellite edition’ of the larger Africa Writes festival, which is organized by the Royal African Society in association with the British Library. It aims to celebrate both established and emerging literature and thought from Africa and the African diaspora (‘About Us’). Aside from the relationship with the British Library, other regional partnerships have formed to co-curate satellite events in places including Bristol, Leeds, Swindon and Birmingham (‘About Us’). The Exeter-based edition of the festival was launched with a digital book club in 2020 and is an anchor project for Exeter’s UNESCO City of Literature programme. The first in-person festival weekend was held in 2022, and I had the privilege of attending its second outing spanning the mid-summer days of 2023 from 7 to 9 July. Rooted in local partnerships, Africa Writes – Exeter is organized through a collaboration between the University of Exeter, local independent bookshop Bookbag, creative hub Roots Resistance, Royal African Society and Saseni! The involvement of these cultural institutions speaks to the festival’s ambition and uniqueness.



*Africa Writes being held outside of the independent bookshop Bookbag in McCoys Arcade, Exeter. Photo by Roshad van der Pool.*

The South West is home to many other literary festivals, such as the Cheltenham Literature Festival, the North Cornwall Book Festival, the Marlborough LitFest or the more niche Sherborne Travel Writing Festival. Considering the growing call for inclusion in the ethn racially diverse literary space of the UK, Africa Writes – Exeter stands out as a champion of bold inclusivity by adding a dedicated African node to the broad literary network in the South West. This extension is not just about celebrating African artists from the region, but rather about converging African interests there, as evidenced by the geographically diverse African and African diaspora talents celebrated at the festival. Through this work the festival delivers value in different forms.

### PERSONAL VALUE: THE PLACE OF THE FESTIVAL

The personal value you gain at a literary festival can be described in terms of the entertainment you derive from the events. It can also be measured in terms of the overall experience you have at the location and through the interactions you have with others. As such, the place of a literary festival plays a significant role in its success. We can think of place as the venue’s reputation, location and atmosphere. These elements create sentiments and impressions, timestamping and geotagging memorable experiences on our minds. Africa Writes – Exeter was held at Bookbag and Exeter Phoenix: the former is an independent bookstore that regularly holds a range of creative



Okechukwu Nzelu reading from his novel *Here Again Now*.  
Photo by Roshad van der Pool.

literary events while the latter hosts all kinds of art events. Both locations were significant to the mission of the festival because they promote the indie side of publishing while integrating the festival into the city's cultural climate. The events of the first day ran from 6 p.m. to about 10 p.m., winding down with music and dance. The longer summer days provided a perception of extended activity rather than the sense of rapid conclusion that typically accompanies dusk. More so, having the events into the evening was ideal, as working participants would have closed from work for the day and most likely would be looking to have a relaxing evening.

The events of the second day placed a focus on honest, thoughtful conversations and reflections. Peace

Adzo Medie talked about *Nightbloom* as a deliberate attempt to explore the mundane that we may naturally treat as superficial. The author expressed her interest in migration and social evolution and the ways in which these shape family tension, particularly in relation to family structures in West Africa. Okechukwu Nzelu spoke about taking roughly eight years to write his debut novel – a project that he undertook as a full-time teacher. US-based Chika Unigwe, author of *The Middle Daughter*, recounted the difficulty of 'living her characters' in order to be able to write about them. Leila Aboulela talked about the pitfalls of getting carried away with over-researching before writing. The usual question about the writing process was thrown to almost all the authors.

Overall, the first and second days were both distinctive and engaging in their own ways. A creative writing workshop for children was the last event of the festival, and held on the third and final day. Evidently, the place of the festival was excellently curated, setting a solid platform to entertain the audience through immersive experiences – creating personal value for participants.

### EXTENDED CULTURAL VALUE: INCORPORATING ADVOCACY

Africa Writes – Exeter 2023 was indicative of progressive representation that contributes to the sustainability of the literary culture in the region and is sensitive to social justice and advocacy. To create a thriving literary culture that lasts, we need to foster a love of books in future creators and consumers both actively (at schools) and passively (through literary events). This means we must constantly think of ways to engage and appeal to children and young people in the activities at the core of literary and publishing cultures. Africa Writes – Exeter aptly demonstrated a commitment to this through their writing workshop for children aged 7–12 and creative workshop for teenagers and young adults aged 16–24. This marks an indirect but proactive contribution towards preserving interest in the literary field. Here, the festival adds extended value to the literary and publishing industry, which plays a crucial role in enriching the sociocultural fabric of society.

However, the success of activist festival curation remains in the live connections built with audiences. On entering the venue on the first day, I met

visibly excited participants who made the environment lively with warm chats, happy faces and palpable anticipation of satisfaction. The authors excelled in their author-performer role, which seems to have become an expectation in live literature (Wiles). Beginning with Al-Saddiq's poetry 'performance' in Arabic on the first day, his translators effortlessly amused the audience as they recounted the uncertainty and difficulty they often encountered while translating the author's work. By the time Ros Martin was up at 8 p.m., the author performances had become deeply immersive. These live readings are a bit different from the solo-immersion you encounter when you read a book. The context of the story, which the authors begin with before reading, creates a different experience entirely. You are subtly invited to think about the loved ones lost, the fallen being honoured, and those receiving heartfelt recognition. These weave you into the readings in different and emotionally charged ways, stirring laughter, empathy or sympathy. In-between readings, commentary is inserted, providing further emotional engagement with you. This is classic performance and Africa Writes – Exeter 2023 was replete with it.

Another way in which the festival added extended cultural value was through its careful incorporation of advocacy. A commitment to social justice was in evidence in the choices of writers and books showcased through the festival. A particular platform was given to highlight the ongoing political conflict in Sudan, with Sudanese writer Leila Aboulela headlining the festival

weekend. On Friday evening Sudanese poet Nour Khairi performed poetry, emphasizing the years of turmoil in the country and its ripple effects across nations. This emphasis is significant as it reminds us of the ravaging unrests and political struggles that have swept across Africa for decades. Political turmoil is not all there is. Cultural struggles are equally rampant, as echoed by the feminist issues raised by Peace Adzo Medie and Chika Unigwe. The political rejection of the LGBTQIA+ community in many African countries also gave a particular significance to the visibility and celebration of critically-acclaimed queer authors on the programme. The curators of Africa Writes – Exeter skilfully illustrated their understanding that being African is not only about skin colour, but also about every other sociocultural element of identity.

ones they have back there. For the sake of the day that some intend to joyfully announce ‘I’m coming home’. For the sake of their strong connection to the roots of their identity. This is a reason why Africans in the UK value advocacy and discourse about salient issues concerning the continent. Advocacy drives a strong sense of bonding and provides an opportunity for the kind of global mainstream attention that stirs hope for progressive engagements. Africa Writes – Exeter brought home to Exeter for many. The festival audience had roots in Sudan, Somalia, Somaliland, Kenya, Rwanda, Ghana, South Africa and Nigeria, and many travelled from all across the South West, from Bristol to Plymouth and beyond. One African participant I spoke with had travelled down from Canterbury in the South East. Such audience diversity creates room for audience-to-

certainly have our individual festival expectations and experiences. But we must look beyond these to see how the festivals we love are shaping the literary and cultural spaces we belong in – as well as the broader society in which they are situated. Africa Writes – Exeter shows us what a successful literary festival should look like, from entertaining individuals (creating personal value) to engaging with salient issues of practical relevance (creating extended cultural value). For personal value, we have seen how place and immersive experiences are delivered to create cherished memories for festival participants. We have also been invited even deeper to examine how cultural events like literary festivals can engage with issues of significance to sociocultural or ethnoracial groups. Africa Writes – Exeter is positioned in the South West to create rich value through its live literature with immersive cultural experiences and a deep engagement with current affairs.

In all, a literary festival should not only make us feel good in fun ways. It should also make us think about the world we live in and the people we interact with daily in that world. Africa Writes – Exeter has set a new standard in the South West by these metrics. Organizers of the festival may consider creating participation incentives for emerging African literary creators in the South West to further strengthen the networks the festival is inspiring. Additionally, the organizers may explore how live digital storytelling and performance may be integrated into the festival to create extended immersive experiences. We can only eagerly anticipate how the festival evolves to maximize its potential.

### ‘This style of advocacy creates a new node in the literary network of the South West: a powerful convergence of African literary networks into the regions.’

This style of advocacy creates a new node in the literary network of the South West: a powerful convergence of African literary networks into the region. By touching on key issues of sentimental significance to Africans, the festival creates a safe space for Africans in the UK to converge and share support, solidarity, comfort and hope. Many Africans in the UK cannot stop caring about the peace and prosperity of the continent, for the sake of the loved

audience and audience-to-performer networking. Thus, the festival enabled inter- and intra-racial network associations. All of this was made possible as the festival incorporated advocacy to create sociocultural value with strong implications.

#### CONCLUSION

Let us begin from where we started. When you think of a literary festival, what *now* comes to mind? We

# ‘THE LIBRARY HAS SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE’

## Q&A with Librarians Across the South West

Hannah Van den Branden, in collaboration with Bethan Oakley, Olivia Hargood, Olivia Pearce, Yubin Mai and Arya Anil Kumar

A public library is the beating heart of a community. With their dependability deeply ingrained in society, these vital infrastructures are overlooked, yet are truly invaluable. Just as the heart ushers blood to other connecting systems in the body, libraries have an influence that reaches far beyond the books in their building. Though reliable, this heartbeat is not often metronomic; with inspiring writing competitions, free family meet-up spaces and innovative art workshops, libraries can excite and soothe. A quickening pulse – a child steps through its doors for the first time and is welcomed by magic and adventure in the books that will shape their formative years. A calmed pace – an older person locates their book club nestled by the window, a found family in later years that provides comfort and much-needed laughter. A place to study, to hide, to be seen and to be home. Libraries, perhaps, are the physical manifestation of the imagination itself; there are no limitations to

what can be dreamed and achieved within its four walls.

The South West is a hub of arts and culture: from independent bookshops to literary festivals to writing workshops. Though these are vital to developing creative endeavours, we must not disregard the crucial outreach projects that libraries provide. The South West Museums and Libraries Association Champion details that, at a ‘grass roots level’, ‘the importance of continuous learning, appreciating culture and broadening one’s horizons...should not be overlooked’ (‘South West Museums and Libraries Association Champion’). Accessible to the community at large rather than more specific spheres of literary production, the library encourages an inclusive and intergenerational reading culture. With visually impaired reading clubs in Bristol and Exeter and collaborations with the Cornish writing centre in Truro, libraries in the South West find ways to remain fun, informative and

available to all. Presumably, the rise of ebooks and digital publishing would render a physical library insignificant in an increasingly modernized society. Yet despite funding to British libraries falling by 17% in 2023, in-person visits have increased ‘by 68% since the pandemic’ (Shaffi). Even now, libraries remain a significant pillar of the community. Today, this heart beats more strongly than ever.

Prioritization of free and low-cost events across the creative sectors solidifies the library as an inclusive space to foster creative exchange. How the library connects with and supports marginalized groups is becoming increasingly important. As the cost of living continues to rise, 93% of libraries surveyed across England, Wales and Northern Ireland ‘are preparing to offer free, heated spaces for visitors during the cold months’ (Creamer). As well as the 74% that will ‘host entertainment and cultural activities’, 66% will also ‘run advice sessions on topics such as household budgeting’ (Creamer). Even though over half of these libraries do not expect to receive additional funding, schemes such as these are implemented in order to offer shelter and support to the most vulnerable groups.

Cemented in the public imagination as a place of refuge, it is enticing to discover the unexpected points of access at local libraries throughout the South West. Our libraries host an array of activities, including theatre, talks, discos and poetry workshops, both during and after

hours. We talked to librarians from Exeter, Penzance and Bristol about the core vision and purpose of their organization. Whether council or charity run, these libraries excel at developing and sustaining essential networks between the creative sectors and the public. We were privileged to gain an insight into how each of these libraries redefine what it means to be a bookworm.

### EXETER LIBRARY

Receiving an average of 1,500 visits a day, Exeter Library stands in the city centre, set back from the bustling High Street and next to the historic Rougemont Castle. As the largest library in the county, it boasts more than 1 km of shelves, housing over 60,000 books, CDs and DVDs. Exeter Library certainly focuses on the intergenerational outreach that libraries can provide, with an expansive range of events for all audiences. This essential work with the community encourages innovation, whether literary or otherwise, within the safe space of the library. Furthermore, Exeter Library plays a vital role in protecting the literary heritage of Devon. It is home to The Special Collections Archive, which consists of early printed books from

between 1480 and 1900. Blending the traditions of reading culture with contemporary events is nothing new to Operations Senior Supervisor Chloe Reynolds, with whom we conducted our interview.

**Hannah Van den Branden: Can you tell us a bit about yourself and your role within Exeter Library?**

Chloe Reynolds: I am Chloe, Senior Supervisor for Operations at Exeter Library. Exeter Library is part of Devon Libraries, which is run by Libraries Unlimited, a charity that runs Devon and Torbay Libraries. Being a charity is really exciting, as it allows us to apply to funders such as Arts Council England, and we receive grants that enable us to put on exciting cultural events. Exeter Library is the biggest public library in Devon, so my job is very busy! I always describe Operations as taking care of the building and the people; I make sure everything is set up and we have enough staff to open every day; I deal with any

few extra tables and chairs for a book group, or staging, lighting and sound for a theatre performance. I make sure we've got enough staff and volunteers to run these events. I work closely with our Innovation and Development Supervisor in planning and running events, and it is one of my favourite parts of my job.

**Hannah Van den Branden: Libraries are a vital part of not only the literary community, but also the wider community. They are pillars that have been enjoyed across generations. What do you think still draws people to Exeter Library?**

Chloe Reynolds: There is nowhere quite like a library. [Exeter Library] has something for everyone, from babies enjoying Bounce & Rhyme and borrowing their first books, to teens studying, to older people enjoying a warm and welcoming space in the winter months. We have a brilliant team of staff that are here to help you if

**'We are a great space for performers and artists to try something new, maybe even something they might find challenging. People feel safe and relaxed in the library.'**

problems relating to the condition of the building or health and safety; I approve staff holidays and timesheets; I organize cover for when people are on leave; I manage volunteers and work placements – generally, I make sure every day goes as smoothly as possible! In terms of events, I make sure everything is set up – whether that's a

you need, and we help with everything from obscure book enquiries to tourist information to supporting people looking for work – and much, much more! We are a great space for performers and artists to try something new, maybe even something they might find challenging. People feel safe and relaxed in the library, and while

someone might find the idea of going to a theatre intimidating or expensive, they'd be comfortable walking into the library and discovering a short film or play we are showing or looking at an art exhibition in our foyer.

**Hannah Van den Branden: Libraries certainly have changed with the times, as we all have! What would you say is the most unexpected point of access or event that your library offers? What sets you apart?**

Chloe Reynolds: I think any time we turn the main floor of the library into a performance space, it surprises and delights those attending the event. We move the shelves back on the main floor, build a stage, set up lighting and theatre-style seating, and transform the library into an event space. You get to see a space you know in a whole new way and there's a real buzz of excitement in the air. But with there still being bookshelves all around, it very much still feels like a library, so it creates an entirely unique atmosphere you couldn't get at a regular theatre. Listening to a band or watching a play amongst the books is a wonderful experience – I love putting on our evening events!

**Hannah Van den Branden: What is your main priority when organizing events for the library? What is it about a particular workshop, musical performance or book club that makes it the right fit?**

Chloe Reynolds: The library is a safe and welcoming space, so we like to balance

our events between the sorts of things you'd expect from a library (like Bounce & Rhyme, IT support and book clubs) with some events that give people the chance to experience something new in a familiar environment, like events we ran earlier this year with Hikmat Devon to celebrate Chinese New Year. Cost is also a significant factor when we organize events; as a charity our funds are limited, so we need to run some events where we can make money through ticket sales or donations, but we also want to run events that are free so everyone can enjoy them. With events such as Library Lates we want to pay top-quality local musicians and artists to perform and run workshops, so we need to charge for those tickets to help cover the cost of the event. But we also offer large-scale events for free, like our Big Kids Takeover at the end of the summer, where we turn the library into a big family fun zone for the day with a bouncy castle, disco and much more going on all for free.

**Hannah Van den Branden: Can you tell us a bit more about Library Lates? How does this type of event benefit the library?**

Chloe Reynolds: Library Lates is kind of our 'best of' cultural event, with music and workshops throughout the building. It is a great way to promote what we do and give the people of Exeter a unique and fun night of entertainment. The Silent Disco plays on the idea that you need to be quiet in the library (you don't, though!). So having a drink, a dance and listening to music feels like breaking the rules! I think there's



*The Library Lates Evening at Exeter Library. Photo by Jim Wileman.*

always a little thrill at being in the library ‘after hours’ – a place you usually see during the day is always different in the dark, and with all those stories full of imagination around you, who knows what might happen?

### MORRAB LIBRARY

Overlooking the sea from Penzance’s Morrab Gardens, Morrab Library is a unique organization located in a Grade II listed building. It is Cornwall’s only independent library, dependent instead on the generous charity of its patrons and supporters to keep its doors open. They have a focus on West Cornish history, preserving the past for future generations through their extensive archives of periodicals

from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Morrab Library prides itself on providing a welcoming space, fostering literary engagement in the local community and delivering a personal experience for its members. Their events are essential in sharing the benefits of reading and writing. One such event that highlights this is their Children’s Short Story Competition, which attracted over 220 entries in 2023. We asked Lisa Di Tommaso what she loves about working at the Morrab Library, and why libraries are so crucial to literary networks in the South West.

**Hannah Van den Branden: Can you tell us a bit about yourself, your role and the organization for which you work?**

Lisa Di Tommaso: I am Lisa, the librarian at Morrab Library in Penzance, Cornwall’s only independent library, which was established in 1818. I manage a team of two part-time library assistants, a bookkeeper, a housekeeper and seventy-five wonderful volunteers. The library holds around 70,000 volumes across all subjects (but with a particular focus on West Cornwall), an archive of about 17,000 historic photographs and glass negatives, historic newspapers and an extensive paper archive.

**Hannah Van den Branden: Do you think being a charity organization that is supported by the generosity of library lovers changes anything in how the library is run? How does it differ from council-led libraries?**

Lisa Di Tommaso: I think there is a big difference in being an independent charity as people who join feel they have invested in our operations and therefore, to some degree, feel a sense of ownership. This in turn engenders loyal support for the work we do. Members are also aware that finances are tight and know we achieve an awful lot even though our total staffing amounts to two and a half full-time equivalents working with seventy-five volunteers.

**Hannah Van den Branden: Libraries are a vital part of not only the literary community, but also the wider community. They are pillars that have been enjoyed across generations. What do you think still draws people to their local library?**

Lisa Di Tommaso: I can only speak for my own independent library, but I would suggest that beyond the collections held here which aid research and provide leisure, we are unique in providing comfortable workspaces for people. Several of our new members now work from home, and for various reasons they prefer to do so (quietly!) in our spaces rather than in their home environment. More and more students use us as a peaceful base to study as well. Others come for our talks and classes, or to meet like-minded people in a safe, welcoming and warm environment. We have become more of a community space as well as a working library in the last few years, and I think people welcome spaces like these.

**Hannah Van den Branden: What is your main priority when organizing events for the library? What is it about a particular workshop, musical performance or book club that makes it the right fit? Please share details of any memorable events you have organized or been a part of and what you would like to do in the future.**

Lisa Di Tommaso: We don’t have to look far; most speakers and class leaders approach us to offer their time to deliver an event or book a room to use. In the decision process, we like to concentrate our talks programme on local Cornish history and people, as well as wider subjects based on the interests of our members (based on what they borrow and ask us about). Our artists-in-residence are members who have been asked to create art pieces inspired by their time spent in the library. We

sometimes look for gaps in what we offer, children's events for example, and develop events in-house, working with volunteers to deliver them, from story times for toddlers, to creative writing courses for older children. In terms of scale, our most memorable events have been the 2022 Poetry Competition, which attracted more than 3,000 international entries, and our Children's Short Story Competition for Cornish youth in 2023, which attracted more than 200 entries.

Through our events programme and room hire for classes and workshops, we provide a space for local artists, crafters and writers to express themselves and become known to a wider audience. With improved resourcing, we would love to offer more of this.

**Hannah Van den Branden: Libraries certainly have changed with the times, as we all have! What would you say is the most unexpected point of access or event that your library offers? What sets you apart?**

Lisa Di Tommaso: I think our library embraces and thrives on tradition and history. The building in which we are located is a former family home built in 1841, and although we moved into it in 1889, it still has the feel of a residence as much as a library, which leaves our members and visitors feeling very much at home. We still use card catalogue indexes (and a 'Browne Issue' system) for loans, which our members find charming (but can be very challenging for staff)! We pride ourselves on a personal service, getting to know our members, their stories

and interests, and trying hard to make them feel like they are part of a special Morrab community.

### BRISTOL LIBRARIES

Bristol Libraries run a group of twenty-seven libraries in Bristol and the surrounding areas, providing free public access to books and digital resources. Additionally, they organize various outreach community projects to engage children and adults with their services and often promote an interest in books and reading. Their 'Book-Bike' scheme aims to provide books and library services in local communities as part of Words on Wheels, highlighting the functions and opportunities awarded by local public libraries. Equally, a partnership between Bristol Libraries, Libraries Connected and Natural England produced the Culture Nature Project and NatureFest. This enabled local libraries to play a pivotal role in helping individuals rediscover nature through mindful walks, book selection and other activities. In this interview, we hear from Charlie Miles, Library Development Officer from Bristol Libraries.

**Hannah Van den Branden: Can you tell us a bit about yourself, your role and the organization for which you work?**

Charlie Miles: I work for Bristol City Council – more specifically in the Reader Engagement Team of the Library Service as a Library Development Officer. The purpose of our team is to encourage more people to engage with the library service through ongoing outreach projects and events. Sometimes this



*A warm, sunny day at Morrab Library. Photo by Lisa di Tommaso.*

involves simple promotion of library services (not just reading/books but public computer use, social or hobby groups, educational opportunities or anything taking place in a library) through social media or leaflets, posters and information stands. Sometimes it involves running regular activities in libraries or online, such as reading groups, journalling, story times, after-school clubs and adult talk clubs. We plan and promote one-off events like author talks as well as nature walks,

lectures, plays, poetry readings or workshops for adults and children. We also look after 'library friends' groups and do our best to work with local community groups and organizations. As a rule of thumb, I tend to think of our role as 'extra-curricular' library work: anything that is outside of the day-to-day bread-and-butter running of a library is potentially part of our remit.

**Hannah Van den Branden: Libraries are a vital part of not only the literary community, but also the wider community. They are pillars that have been enjoyed across generations. What do you think still draws people to their local library?**

Charlie Miles: There are very few public places left that will allow a person to simply be there – particularly safe, comfortable, warm places – without expecting them to buy something; a library is one of those places. The function of a library has changed over the last few decades from a place primarily of study, to being a community space that people are encouraged to view as their own and use for more than just accessing books and other print media. While the books are a large draw for many people, the free access to computers and the ability to print and photocopy are incredibly important, as are friendly staff and volunteers who can help people unsure with IT. The library also offers a free or cheap place for social groups to meet. The toddler, baby and children's activities are huge points of access for parents and their children to make social connections.

**Hannah Van den Branden: What is your main priority when organizing events for the library? What is it about a particular workshop, musical performance or book club that makes it the right fit? Please share details of any memorable events you have organized or been a part of.**

Charlie Miles: When deciding whether a particular event is right for a particular

library, our priority is whether there is an audience for it within the local community. If people are unlikely to be interested in attending or coming into the library for it, it isn't necessarily much use to us! For this reason, we try to listen to feedback from service users. It is also important that the event has some sort of social or cultural function – while we aim to entertain people coming into the library it is also important that we can justify an event as fulfilling a need or purpose. This ranges from educating people on important issues, helping them to engage with things that will improve their life quality and wellbeing, or simply introducing them to ideas, narratives, concepts, activities and people they may not have discovered otherwise.

While our libraries have many impressive technological resources – ebooks and online magazine subscriptions, even iPads and Virtual Reality consoles – one of the most consistently popular and accessible things we have are our Lego Clubs that run at several sites and have seen some incredible creations over time!

**Hannah Van den Branden: Outreach and accessibility are key to the public perception of how a library functions in the community. What is it that makes a library a safe space?**

Charlie Miles: The library is welcoming to all people, which means that it has a user base that is diverse racially, economically, culturally and in terms of age and gender. People from all walks of life are encouraged to be here and view it as their own, but also belonging

**‘There are very few public places left that will allow a person to simply be there – particularly safe, comfortable, warm places – without expecting them to buy something; a library is one of those places.’**

to everyone else. This diversity and sense of communal ownership helps to foster a sense of respect and politeness that, for the most part, is adhered to by all who come here. This place exists for all of us and helps everyone out in the ways that it can, so it is in the best interest of our community to ensure that it remains a safe and welcoming place. We also have little tolerance for the people that breach this equilibrium – while all people have a right to access a library service, this right can be revoked if individuals do not treat the space and the people in it with proper respect.

**Hannah Van den Branden: The South West is a hive of artistic, literary, musical and cultural activity. How would you like your library to further contribute to this in the future?**

Charlie Miles: Central Library in particular is a beautiful, storeyed building with incredible spaces and architecture – using the historic reading room more often for talks, readings and potentially musical events or plays would be particularly effective. I think that the library could be seen as a special destination for artists, which would also encourage the general public to view their libraries in a new light as a hub for exciting cultural activity.

## CONCLUSION

Libraries across the South West certainly have a distinct flair for unique events that provide wider access to the literary sphere. Being council and charity led, these libraries are welcoming spaces that rely on the generosity and keen interest of the public. With a broader outreach of influence, libraries across the South West are determined to encourage reading culture, artistic endeavour and creative projects to those who may not otherwise have access. The Morrab Library thrives on its rich tradition and history. It is loved by its loyal members who support Cornwall's only independent library and its busy programmes. Accessibility projects with Bristol Libraries ensure that the library is not only a source of comfort, but can offer a fun atmosphere that can be an essential escape for many. Exeter Library seeks to push the boundaries with its innovative Library Lates that actively reshapes our definition of what a library can be. In our conversations with these librarians, we can confidently reaffirm that a library is the beating heart of a community. Despite recent pressures from lack of funding and presumed loss of interest, the tireless efforts of these organizations mean that these hearts of the South West continue to sustain vital connections across the body of our region.